



6

KEI SAZANE

Illustration By
Ao Nekonabe

Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

“It tickles
me pink
to have
all three
sisters
sleeping
over under
one roof.”

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest daughter of Queen Mirabella.
Older sister to Aliceliese and Sisbell. Has
emerald hair with a golden tint. Possesses
more voluptuous curves than Aliceliese.



Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Middle princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. Shows up at the family villa ill at ease about the well-being of Sisbell, who has been the target of one too many attacks...

“Snuggle with me...
Er, I meant to say I grant you special permission to sleep beside me!”

“I have the right to cuddle with Iska!”

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

Youngest princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty. Captured by Elletear on her way to the palace and whisked away to their family villa...

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World* **OR THE RISE OF A**

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Our Last
CRUSADE
OR THE RISE OF A
New World

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NEW YORK

Copyright

Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World 6

KEI SAZANE

Translation by Jan Cash

Cover art by Ao Nekonabe

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fears deus E soliz duskis kamyu?

How much longer will you veil your face behind the past?

Phi riris tis-sek.

The promised one searches for you.

bekwist Ez rein dusk, phi pheno nec arc.

And you grow unrecognizable to even your beloved, grasping at bygone days.

Utopia Powered by Machines

THE HEAVENLY EMPIRE



Iska

Member of Unit 907—Special Defense for Humankind, Third Division. Used to be the youngest soldier who ever reached the highest rank in the military, the Saint Disciples. Stripped of his title for helping a witch break out of prison. Wields a black astral sword to intercept astral power and its white counterpart, which reproduces the last attack obstructed by its twin. An honest swordsman fighting for peace.



Mismis Klass

The commander of Unit 907. Baby-faced and often mistaken for a child, but actually a legal adult. Klutzy but responsible. Trusts her subordinates. Became a witch after plunging into a vortex.



Jhin Syulargun

The sniper of Unit 907. Prides himself on his deadly aim. Can't seem to shake off Iska, since they trained under the same mentor. Cool and sarcastic, though he has a soft spot for his buddies.



Nene Alkastone

The chief mechanic of Unit 907. Weapon-making genius. Mastered operation of a satellite that releases armor-piercing shots from a high altitude. Thinks of Iska as her older brother. Wide-eyed and loveable.

Risya In Empire

Saint Disciple of the fifth seat. Genius-of-all-trades. A beautiful woman often seen in a suit and glasses with dark green frames. Likes Mismis, her former classmate.

Nameless

Saint Disciple of the eighth seat. Covered from head to toe in an optical camouflage suit. Speaks in a digital voice. Started off in the assassination unit. Boasts physical prowess.

THE NEBULIS SOVEREIGNTY



Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

Second-born princess of Nebulis. Leading candidate for the next queen. Strongest astral mage, who attacks with ice. Feared by the Empire as the Ice Calamity Witch. Hates all the backstabbing happening in the Sovereignty. Enraptured by fair fights against Iska, an enemy swordsman she met on the battlefield.



Rin Vispose

Alice's attendant. An astral mage controlling earth. Maid uniform conceals weapons for assassination. Skilled at deadly espionage. Hard to read her expressions, but has an inferiority complex about her chest.



Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX

Youngest princess of Nebulis. Aliceliese's little sister. Possesses Illumination, which reproduces footage of past events. Saved by Iska when she was captured in the Empire.



Lord Mask On

A member of the House of Zoa, which directly competes with the princesses for the throne. A conspirator whose true motives are unclear.



Kissing Zoa Nebulis

A powerful astral mage. Called the favorite child of the Zoa. Possesses astral power of thorns.



Salinger

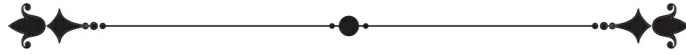
Strongest sorcerer. Imprisoned for attempting to assassinate the queen. Currently at large.



Elletear Lou Nebulis IX

Eldest princess of Nebulis. Focused on traveling abroad. Often absent from the palace.

PROLOGUE



A Report

Nebulis Sovereignty. The Paradise of Witches.

Morning light filtered into the reception hall of the royal palace.

Lush green plants lined every nook and cranny, leaves glistening with dew. A wine-colored carpet had been unfurled over the floor. Everything about this room was resplendent and grand—rebuking the derogatory nature of the term *witch* with its mere existence.

...That was how things *should* have been.

The Queen's Space that Princess Aliceliese knew was a holy ground blessed by astral power, serving as a symbol of their country.

Now...

"...To think such a thing could happen..."

The carpet lining the floor had been scorched, coming apart in ashen clumps. On both ends of the space, the stained glass had splintered, and even its semitransparent lace curtains had disintegrated into black char.

Such were the damages of the coup d'état targeting the Nebulis queen—an assassination plot.

"How could this happen to a room loved by the masses, sheltering generations of queens...?"

Alice, chewing her lip, tried to hold back her anger.

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. Middle princess of the Sovereignty. None in the nation were unfamiliar with her name.

Her glossy blond hair emitted a gentle glow, and there was something

majestic about those ruby eyes. She'd been blessed with a countenance of imposing beauty and a womanly physique for her young age of seventeen. Alice had an appearance fit for a princess.

"..." Her eyes silently swept over the tragic scene.

The instigators of the coup d'état had been trying to overhaul the nation—with the target being the queen, Alice's own mother.

...I thought I'd prepared myself for the worst, but this is something else.

...If Mother hadn't blocked the detonation, there's no saying what disaster could have occurred.

The queen's life had been spared.

Even the subordinates at the scene had gotten out mostly unscathed—save for some shallow wounds—according to the report.

It was all because the queen had used her astral powers to contain the blast.

"Someone from the royal family must have targeted Mother. To think the culprit is one of our own..."

"Thank you, Alice," someone said.

The door swung open. Flanked by two bodyguards, Queen Nebulis IIX entered the Queen's Space.

"I'm relieved to see you're safe, Mother. I was worried sick."

"...Were you?" The queen didn't seem too happy to hear that from her daughter. "Back in the old days, I *was* an astral mage who could hold her own, you know. There used to be tales of Imperial soldiers turning tail at the sight of me... Well, I suppose there's no use talking about that now. We're lucky we made it out alive."

The queen let out a little sigh.

She must have been sleep-deprived. Dark circles had formed around her eyes.

"It's been three days since the coup went down. It happened to take place in the Queen's Space, but they could have surprised me in my private chambers... or in the bath. You could say I'm a little exhausted from being hypervigilant for

so long.”

“If I may, Mother...I’d like to assure you’re safe now that I’m here!”

“To be honest, I’m quite relieved you’re back.”

The queen let out a quiet chuckle, but almost instantly, her brow furrowed again, as her gaze turned to the glassless skylight.

“They really did do a number on us. Capturing the one who attacked Sisbell was the best possible outcome for us under these circumstances. I imagine they’re also responsible for this coup.”

“Yes...but, Mother, the one who attacked Sisbell was...”

“Vichyssoise from the House of Hydra, I’ve heard.”

“...That’s right.”

“I’ll show you a real treat, *Sisbell*.”

“Didn’t the monster in the palace look a little something like this?”

“She isn’t *human*,” an Imperial swordsman—Iska—had confided in Alice when she had come scrambling to the scene.

By the time of Alice’s arrival, Vichyssoise had run out of steam, reduced back to her human form, but by all accounts, she had been beastly when she’d attacked Sisbell.

...I found the whole thing hard to believe, especially since I didn’t see her evolved state.

...But I guess Rin confirmed she witnessed the same thing.

Sisbell, Iska, and Rin all claimed to have seen Vichyssoise the witch in her other form.

Alice had been on edge the whole time they’d transported Vichyssoise to the palace in the central state, worried she might suddenly transform into her monster form.

“How did the Hydra respond, Mother?”

“They didn’t admit to any wrongdoing, naturally. They’re standing their

ground that ‘this has nothing to do with the family, and Vichyssoise acted alone.’ Until we catch them red-handed, we can’t lock them up. Suspending their activities was the best we could manage.”

The queen had been informed Vichyssoise could turn into a monster, too. Frustratingly enough, Alice could offer only a vague description of her beast form, since she hadn’t seen it herself.

...I’m certain the Hydra are embroiled in the coup.

...But they sacrificed Vichyssoise by severing ties with her.

Like a lizard shedding its tail.

It wasn’t hard to imagine the Hydra were doing everything in their power to protect their status—even if it meant foisting the blame on the assailant who’d attacked Sisbell.

“What about the Zoa, Mother?”

“Also still suspects. There are, at present, three possible culprits.” The queen continued to look up at the skylight. “In the beginning, it was just the Zoa. Then the Hydra, when Vichyssoise tried to maul Sisbell. That makes two. What do you think the last possibility is, Alice?”

“...That the Hydra and Zoa are working together?”

“Indeed. Except that has the lowest possibility. Right now, I believe the primary culprit is one of those houses. It pains me to say this because we share blood, but this opportunity could be good for the Lou.”

The queen must have been hinting at the conclave—the election to decide the next ruler. If the Lou could pin down the perpetrator of the coup, their approval rating would get bumped up, while confidence in the Zoa and Hydra would plunge down.

“But, Mother, we have no conclusive proof...”

“...Until Sisbell returns. We can solve everything once she re-creates the incident with her power.”

The queen had uttered the name of her youngest daughter, who was currently absent from the palace.

Her power of Illumination could replay past phenomena—a rare astral skill that could manipulate time and space.

“Alice, is she still in the eighth state, Liesbaden?”

“Yes. Ever since the assault, she’s been lying low to prevent another incident. Rin is with her, so I know where she is.”

Well, there was another group acting as her guards.

Alice could never confide in the queen that her little sister had hired an Imperial unit—of all people! No need to spread unnecessary rumors that the Lou were colluding with the Empire.

...If Iska is with her, the enemy won’t be able to attack so easily.

...I’m more worried she might try something funny with Iska.

Princess Sisbell was lying in the wait. Her attendant, Shuvalts, had returned to the central state, preparing to meet with the queen to arrange Sisbell’s arrival. Only then would Sisbell come back under the queen’s directives.

If all went well, the Lou would come out of this victorious. After all, Sisbell was the missing piece they needed to expose the group organizing the coup.

“Have you already had an audience with Shuvalts, Mother?”

“Alice, when will her attendant return?”

Their questions overlapped.

“...Excuse me?” Alice’s jaw dropped to the floor.

What was her mother *talking* about?

Shuvalts had arrived in the central state...three days ago. If Sisbell had said so, it had to be true.

“Um...Mother, what’s going on?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Alice... What did you just say?” The queen was simply bowled over by this situation.

The two guards behind her failed to hide their shock, blinking back at the royal family.

“I thought you’d already met with her attendant.”

“Nay. I’ve been waiting for him in the palace so we could settle matters immediately. I assumed he would come with you...” Her eyes began to dim.
“Alice. You met with Sisbell. What did she tell you?”

“That she’s been waiting to hear back from him since he arrived at the central state.”

“And when did he return?”

“...Three days ago.”

That was right. His return, strangely enough, coincided with the day of the rebellion.

Shuvalts had arrived at the central state in the afternoon. Everything had gone down that evening.

“...How peculiar. And you?” She turned toward her guards.

They simply shook their heads.

“Unfortunately, my queen, we have not seen him, either.”

“We can ask the palace workers, but I doubt we will find any signs of him having entered the palace.”

That meant...Sisbell’s messenger had arrived in the central state but never reached the palace.

“Someone might have stopped him, my queen...”

“Indeed. If they’re insolent enough to go after me, I’m certain they won’t have any reservations in abducting Sisbell’s attendant. They must have captured him as he was nearing the palace.”

A hush fell over the room.

Tension mounted as Alice, the queen, and the two guards came to the same conclusion.

...Who could successfully abduct Shuvalts?

...He’s an astral mage and used to work as a spy. Locating him should have

been near impossible.

Could this have been the Zoa or the Hydra?

Well, neither, to be honest. Even if they were working together, meddling with the affairs of an undercover agent was nigh unfeasible. If anyone could do it, it would be someone close to the Lou, someone intimately familiar with him.

For example...

“My Majesty,” someone sang out in a sonorous voice.

A pair of heels clicked softly as another princess made her way into the Queen’s Space.

“Elletear?”

“I’ve been looking for you. I wanted to get your opinion on something, and your private chambers were empty.”

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

Under the gaze of all present, the princess strolled across the room—an ethereal presence. Her big, loose curls were emerald with a light golden tinge. She was taller than Alice, and there was something undeniably sensual about her bust, which was far bigger than Alice’s chest, swaying under her royal garb.

She was a witch...and not in the astral mage way. In her prime, twenty-year-old Elletear was growing more bewitching by the day.

“Hee-hee. Your Majesty?” Elletear asked. “Has Sisbell’s messenger arrived?”

“—” They all gulped.

It felt as if they’d been placed under a curse.

Who would have imagined the eldest daughter would ask that herself, especially when she was suspected of having ties with the Zoa?

“This is Sisbell we’re talking about,” Elletear continued. “I’m certain she’s already dispatched a messenger—either her attendant or some hired soldiers. Either way, shouldn’t they be here by now?”

“...Not yet,” rasped the queen. “Elletear.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know something? Like if her attendant has arrived at the palace?”

“No.” The eldest daughter offered a tiny smile, answering in a jubilant voice.

“I think you should be patient.”

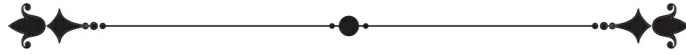
“Be *patient*? That’s impossible in this situation, Elletear.”

“Yes, why of course. I meant to say that you shouldn’t rush things. And...”

The eldest princess pressed a hand to her cheek—as if pretending to conceal her face, which was flushed pink from excitement.

“...I think someone ought to go fetch our dear sister.”

CHAPTER 1



Where Did We Go Wrong?

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Liesbaden. The eighth state.

Its urban landscape on the Sovereign border could almost be mistaken for a neutral city. It had flourished under trade with neighboring countries back when it had been an independent state.

Not even the tiniest speck of litter could be found on the stone paving, over which girls and boys hurried to school. Commuting cars passed by on the roadway next to them.

However...from the window of the hotel room, one could see the severe expressions of the military police marching down the streets.

“Hey, Iska? They’re even in the hotel lobby. I think they’re checking to see if any suspicious characters are staying here.”

“Did they seem suspicious of you, Nene?”

“Nope. Plus, I slipped upstairs right away.”

“...If they’d caught you, that’d make you seem like the guiltiest one around,” Iska said, surveying the living room.

Nene had just returned, now sitting at a chair positioned next to the table. Her bright-red hair had been swept up in a ponytail. Next to her, the silver-haired sharpshooter was adjusting his personal gun.

...Commander Mismis is out buying lunch.

...Unit 907 is somehow managing since we entered the Sovereignty a few days

ago.

Two superpowers—the mechanical utopia, the Empire, and the witches’ paradise, the Nebulis Sovereignty—had been locked in a war stretching over a century.

If it got out that Imperial soldiers had sneaked into Sovereign land, all hell would break loose. It would be only a matter of time until they were rounded up by the military police.

“Don’t worry too much about it. Their police officers aren’t on the lookout for Imperial units anyway.” Jhin sounded like he was whispering to himself as he wrapped up his inspection of his gun.

“They don’t have the time to even *think* about the Empire right now. It’s been four days since the queen was almost assassinated in their palace. And even as the nation remains on high alert, another explosion went off in the eighth state the day before yesterday. Its target? The queen’s associate.”

That very target was the girl sitting next to Iska. It was more like she was sitting *on* him. Her slender shoulders pressed against his as her head draped down.

“Sisbell.”

“...” The strawberry blonde did not stir.

She must not have had the energy to muster an answer.

Sisbell Lou Nebulis IX.

Unit 907 knew her as “the queen’s associate,” but Iska was the only one privy to the fact that she was the youngest princess of Nebulis. One of their duties as her guards was hiding out in this luxury hotel.

“I know this weighs heavy on your mind, but you haven’t eaten since yesterday. Try to have a piece of bread,” Iska urged.

“...I’m not hungry,” she rasped. “I’m entirely fine. I’m calm. Skipping a meal or two is no big deal.”

“Okay. Let’s forget about yesterday. Just promise me something. Promise me that you’ll eat something when Commander Mismis comes back with lunch.”

“...”

“You wanted the Imperial unit as your guards, and we’ve been doing our jobs to the best of our abilities. I need you to show us that you’re trying, too.”

Sisbell silently nodded.

Immediately after, she went back to hanging her head, leaning against Iska.

...Figures. After all, her mother’s life was just in grave danger, and hers was in jeopardy, too.

...Plus, it’s been radio silence from her attendant.

Her aide was an older man named Shuvalts. He was the only person other than the queen whom Sisbell allowed in her inner circle. He had left her a message upon reaching the central state four days ago...but nothing since then.

Had things gone as planned, he should have contacted the queen and communicated a safe route home to Sisbell by now.

“Anyway, it’s time. We can rethink our strategy when the boss returns,” Jhin muttered under his breath.

This time, his words were clearly directed at someone.

“Your attendant must have failed to get an audience with the queen. He was probably stopped right after he got into the central state—before ever making it to the palace.”

“Are you saying Shuvalts fell into the hands of the enemy?!” Sisbell shot up from her seat.

Her soft features hardened into a scowl as she glared at Jhin.

“Y-you swine! That’s impossible! Shuvalts is an excellent spy. He is simply taking his time getting to the palace and—”

“Our enemy is a monster.”

“...Gh!”

“Vichyssoise was her name, right? Your assailant was an inhuman beast. I’m not saying the geezer isn’t some genius or that he’s a failure. Our enemy just *sucks*. I mean, these people tried to assassinate the queen, and they’re still at

large.”

Sisbell bit her lip.

The silver-haired sniper continued. “I don’t know the details of the Queen’s Space, but the culprits managed to escape after pulling off a coup in the middle of the royal palace. Which means they must be intimately familiar with the palace. As you said, it’s someone close to the royal family.”

“...Exactly.”

“They were going to figure out your plans, one way or the other. I assume they calculated the geezer’s route to the palace.”

“...” Sisbell didn’t refute him.

She looked up at the ceiling before sinking into the sofa as though she’d been drained of all power. “...For argument’s sake, what would changing strategies mean in practical terms?”

“We got two possibilities,” Jhin said immediately. “We can be in the Sovereignty for twenty more days. We could use that time to wait to hear from the old guy. Or we could operate on our own.”

“Two more days. Today and tomorrow.”

“Hmm?” Jhin asked.

Sisbell seemed certain about her choice.

“We’ll wait two more days. If we don’t hear from Shuvalts by then, we’ll head to the central state on our own. Doesn’t that work for you, Iska?”

“...That was quick.”

“We’d agreed to this from the start.” Sisbell offered a bitter smile. “Even if he wasn’t captured by the enemy, we knew he could be dragged into something unexpected. Which is why we had an arrangement—that he had seven days to get back to me.”

“If I cannot get a hold of you for a week, then—”

“My lady, do not worry about me, and make your way to the palace. Exercise discretion and be very careful.”

It had been seven days since Shuvalts's departure. Even without Jhin's prompting, the princess would have made the decision on her own.

"We'll head out the day after tomorrow. I'll make arrangements for us to board a train heading to the central state tomorrow, so make plans accordingly."

Sisbell glanced at the clock on the wall. It was eleven thirty in the morning.

"I'm going to take a stroll down the hallway until Commander Mismis returns. Iska, will you accompany me?"

The two of them headed to the corridor, making their way to the elevator at the end of the hall. Waiting for them two floors up was a familiar brunette.

"I've been waiting for you, Lady Sisbell."

"Rin..."

Alice's attendant.

Sisbell's face immediately clouded over. As Shuvalts was for Sisbell, Rin was a soldier who acted as both guard and intelligence agent for Alice.

...So Sisbell still doesn't trust Alice.

...She must believe Alice might have had something to do with the coup.

If she still considered her own sister a threat, Sisbell obviously couldn't let her guard down around her sister's attendant either.

"Rin. Don't you think this is enough? I hate that I must see you twice a day. I might put up with you *surveilling* me, but I would like to head back to the queen as soon as possible."

"Lady Sisbell. I don't want to offend you, but I'm not surveilling you. I'm *guarding* you."

"As ordered by my sister Alice."

"Yes."

"Who I don't fully trust yet."

"..." Rin looked uneasy. "...I've been entrusted with a message from Her

Majesty.”

“Really? I’ll have you know I won’t tolerate you lying to me. I can reproduce any of your conversations with my astral power.”

“The message concerns your powers.” Rin lowered her voice to a whisper.

They were in a hotel corridor. Iska could sense no sign of other people, but someone could pass by without a moment’s notice.

“Her Majesty said, ‘To persuade our retainers, we need proof that Vichyssoise can transform into a monster.’”

“And?”

“She would like a photograph... Imperial swordsman.”

Rin took out a brand-new video camera that she must have purchased at an electronics shop. She chucked it at Iska.

“You photograph it. Lady Sisbell can re-create Vichyssoise’s form using her astral power. Document it with the camera.”

“So you can take it to the palace?” Iska confirmed.

“Correct. We need a considerable amount of evidence to banish the Hydra—I’ve said too much already. This has nothing to do with you, so there is no need to concern yourself over it.”

Alice’s attendant stuck her nose in the air, but Sisbell refused to permit such an attitude.

“Rin. Iska works for me now. I will not allow you to treat him like that.”

“I technically don’t work for you,” Iska piped up. “I’m just your guard.”

“Iska pledged to serve me forever. Any slight toward him is a slight to me.”

“In your dreams!” he shouted.

“Don’t play me for a fool, Rin. You might be my sister’s attendant, but you’re nothing compared to me.”

“Humph.” Rin’s eyebrow twitched.

That must have hit a nerve—since Sisbell had just slighted Alice, albeit

indirectly.

“I do not wish to offend you, Lady Sisbell, but that sounded like you were insulting my lady. And I cannot let that slide.”

“Rin.” The youngest princess took the video camera from Iska. “Let me take a guess: I bet you’re insecure about your bust size!”

“Hnghhhh?!” Rin’s whole body jolted as if she’d been electrocuted.

“It’s been a whole year of the same cup size, even though you’re on the cusp of seventeen. And that makes you anxious. Right?”

“Wh-wh-wha—?! ...Based on what evidence?!”

“Heh-heh. You can’t hide anything from my astral power—including your late-night activities from the day before.” Sisbell’s face broke out into a victorious smile.

Rin looked like she was hiding her small chest with her hands. “Y-you nasty little...! Lady Sisbell, I never would have guessed you’re a voyeur—”

“Your dinner consisted of a mound of shredded lettuce, nuts, and a glass of hot milk. All foods said to make boobs bigger.”

“...Ugh...uhhh?!” Rin’s face flushed bright red.

Sisbell pointed the video camera at the attendant.

“And even later into the night, I was unfortunate enough to witness you engaging in bath-time stretches designed to boost your cup size!”

“Enooooough!” Rin’s wail echoed down the hotel corridor.

“It was shocking. I cannot believe you would engage in such behaviors every night.”

“N-no! You’ve got it wrong! All wrong! I-I was...testing out something I read in a magazine... I was just a little curious...!”

“I can re-create everything right now. And I even have a camera to record it.”

“Hraaaaaagh?!” She couldn’t even form words anymore.

Rin’s face was pushing past red. In fact, she was turning blue.

Iska was starting to feel sorry for her as he watched from the sidelines.

...Content aside, this is just plain brutal. What a bone-chilling threat.

...I get why even their retainers are scared of Sisbell's astral power.

She would immediately be able to uncover the culprit of the coup as soon as she entered palace grounds. After all, she was a descendant of the Founder—a force to be reckoned with.

“Y-you win... P-please keep that to yourself!”

“As long as you understand. Iska, let’s go,” Sisbell ordered, crossing her arms.

She turned her back on Rin, who had been sapped of life, then marched toward the elevator.

“Damn you, Imperial swordsman!” Rin snarled.

“Ow! H-hey! What do you think you’re doing with that knife?!”

He’d been stabbed!

As soon as Sisbell’s gaze had turned elsewhere, Rin had prodded him with a concealed blade.

“You...you have brought such shame onto me...”

“This wasn’t my fault!”

“Shut up! Shut up! Now that you’ve learned my little secret, I’ll make you pay! You better be ready!”

“What the hell am I paying for?!”

Iska ran for his life from the teary-eyed attendant.

2

Iska’s crew was staying on the ninth floor of the hotel.

“Curtains are closed. Now nobody can see us from outside. That good enough?”

“That’ll do.”

They were crowded near the wall of the living room. Jhin had drawn the window curtains shut. Nene was acting as the cameraman, stabilizing the video camera by the table.

Commander Mismis was at Sisbell's side, wearing an expression both immensely curious and incredibly panicked.

Commander Mismis Klass.

She stood a full head shorter than Iska, and her face had youthful charm. Anyone would have mistaken her for a teenager...but she was actually twenty-two.

"You're not doing anything. Stop fidgeting, boss," Jhin said.

"B-but...", Commander Mismis whined softly.

Her naivete usually worked to her advantage, but she was acting as defenseless as a kitten in an unfamiliar location right now.

"Wh-what should I do?"

"What do you mean? You can't be oblivious to your astral power forever—or it'll spell trouble. For me in particular," Sisbell clarified from next to her. "Not really for you."

Though Sisbell was the one in her teens, Mismis's petite physique made her seem younger between the two.

"In two days, we will get on a train... Even without the issue with my attendant, the central state is on a whole other level in terms of security. It wouldn't surprise me if they immediately asked for your identification upon arrival."

As Imperial subjects, Iska and the rest of the unit had no way to assert their residency in the Sovereignty. The only loophole was using Mismis, a newly minted witch.

This had all happened because Mismis had plunged into a vortex, imbuing her with an unknown power called astral energy.

"The astral crest is our best form of identification. You might be able to skip any questioning, Commander, by showing them your left shoulder."

“...Uh-huh.”

“But there’s one problem! We’ll invite unwanted questions if said astral mage knows nothing of her powers or how to use it.”

Unit 907 wouldn’t be the only ones in trouble if that happened. It would put Sisbell in a tough spot as the one who had hired them. Had her attendant been around, she might have been able to work around such issues with some clever negotiation techniques, but he was absent at the moment.

“Just to be clear, I’m a terrible communicator,” Sisbell admitted.

“Why do you sound like you’re bragging?”

“W-watch your mouth! Anyway, I’m not very good at talking my way out of situations for other people, so I need you to fend for yourself!”

Sisbell was going to teach Mismis the basics of astral power so the commander could pretend to be from the Sovereignty. This had been her final request before they boarded the train.

“...I know I made it sound intense, but I imagine Imperial soldiers know a decent amount about astral power...for better or for worse.”

In the century-long war, the astral corps and the Human Defense Force had shown each other their hands.

“You already know what my astral power can do. I guess the best thing I can do is show you a quick demonstration, Commander Mismis.”

In the middle of the living room, Sisbell’s hand hovered over the buttons of her shirt near her chest. With practiced movements, she undid her topmost one and the one under it.

“The astral crest can be in any location. Arms and legs are pretty common spots, but it isn’t rare to have one that’s a little more...concealed.”

The witch princess was loosening the clothes over her chest. Her face started to flush, perhaps because Jhin and Iska were watching.

In the space just between her collarbone and the top of her chest...glowed a faint crest in the darkened room.

“Have you heard the voice of your astral power before, Commander?”

“Huh?”

“I’m guessing not. It isn’t as loud as a human voice, but I imagine you must hear something when your mind wanders. That’s when you’re awakening as an astral mage.”

“...” Mismis seemed alarmed.

“Is there a problem? Do you hate being a witch like me?” Sisbell pressed, tone hardening. “I will not stoop so low as to empathize with an Imperial subject. After all, we aren’t friends. But...”

The princess gazed at Jhin and Nene before peeking at Iska out of the corner of her eye.

“If Unit 907 would like to join the Sovereignty, I would be willing to entertain that upon my return to the palace. Just keep that in mind.”

The purebred planted her hand to her chest.

“Oh planet, show me your past.”

The astral light illuminated the space in front of her and converged into one beam. Like a projector, it displayed the image of the witch from the day before yesterday.

“Didn’t the monster in the palace look a little something like this?”

The Mutant Star, “Test Subject Vi.”

The witch’s beguiling cackle echoed through the living room. Violent flames roared, engulfing the redheaded witch before their eyes.

“Eek!” Mismis yipped, nearly jumping out of her skin.

Jhin knitted his eyebrows together as Nene opened her eyes wide, holding the camera still. A monster was standing there.

And this was *no human*.

Its red hair had been calcified like a gem. The skin on its entire body was transparent like jellyfish. The night sky could be seen straight through it.

Vichyssoise. The witch.

The assassin after Sisbell. A formidable foe whom Iska had narrowly repelled in a vicious battle.

“Huh? I-is this really just an image?!”

“More like a three-dimensional reproduction. I’m also mimicking the sounds. Nene, make sure the camera is rolling.”

“...Uh-huh.” Nene agreed with a sharp nod, hands trembling.

Beside her, the silver-haired sniper was smiling wanly.

“This is ridiculously real. Even though you told us exactly what it could do, I can’t believe this is your astral power... Our hologram technology totally pales in comparison.”

“I was surprised the first time I saw it, too.”

This was Iska’s second time witnessing this phenomenon.

Back in the independent state of Alsamira, he had seen it when she’d activated her power against the Object, “summoning” a massive sandstorm of unbelievable scale. It had managed to completely deceive the optical scopes of the autonomous soldier.

“This is why they’re after me.” Sisbell’s eyes seemed to cloud over. “If I return to the palace, I will be able to expose the culprit in front of everyone. Which must be why they dispatched that witch to stop me.”

“...I get it now. I mean, it’s amazing.” Nene inhaled deeply, pausing the camera. She had been so enraptured that she had forgotten to breathe.

“This is the end of the demonstration, Commander.”

“...Uh, right...”

“Whether you like it or not, you will eventually hear your astral power. When that happens, you will need to accept or reject it. You should really reflect on what you want to do.”

Sisbell buttoned up her shirt. Then she walked to the window and threw open the shades.

“There isn’t much time left for you to consider it.”

3

Nebulis Sovereignty. Star Spire.

The Stardust Skyscraper housed the private chambers of the queen—a century’s worth of queens, in fact, starting with their great ancestor, Nebulis I.

The ceiling had been crafted from a unique type of glass, and when night fell, one could see the entire sky of stars like a planetarium.

“I know I said I was relieved to have you back, Alice. After all, we don’t know when they’ll strike next. However...”

Perched on a luxe bed—much too big for one person—in a thin negligee, the queen let out a loud sigh.

“...I do not recall asking you to spend the night with me...”

“Yes, Mother, but I want to do this. We must show the culprit that the Lou are a united front!”

Alice was sprawled in the bed, also in a negligee. Her cleavage was peeking out as she lay on her back, but the only one there was her mother—nothing to be embarrassed about.

“Until Sisbell returns, I will stay by your side. Just mother and daughter—no one else!”

“...Well. I suppose you’re just trying to be helpful, so I’ll allow it.”

“That’s right. It’s been too long since I’ve spent time in your room. Even lying in your bed like this is a good time.”

In the corner of the bedroom was a bookshelf stacked with history books and reports on topics concerning the Sovereignty. All of them would have given Alice an instant migraine if she’d tried to read them as a child.

The other things on the shelves were photo books.

“...” Alice nonchalantly picked up one of them.

It wasn't as though she *wanted* to look through it. It was kind of just on reflex. She even considered putting it right back on the shelf.

She already knew its contents by heart, even without flipping through the pages. The book featured photos of Alice when she was a child, as well as with her two sisters, playing with each other and getting along.

...Am I ten here? Or younger?

...We were so close back then...

Had their relationship been ruined by the conclave, which would select the next queen? Alice had a feeling that if they hadn't had to fight among themselves, they could have remained friendly with each other.

"There's nothing interesting in there."

"Huh?" Alice hadn't been expecting to hear such force from her mother, especially when the princess was visibly distressed.

What could the queen mean? Her comment made Alice flip through the book out of curiosity. She gasped quietly.

"...What's this?"

It didn't contain photographs of the three sisters...but an old, faded image of a short-haired girl who looked like Alice but less emotive.

"That's me. Back when I belonged to the astral corps...over thirty years ago."

"Back from those days..."

This wasn't a photo book of her and her sisters. That explained her mother's cryptic comment from earlier, though Alice found its contents now extremely interesting.

...I have never seen these photos before.

...I wonder if they're from the battlefield?

On the rocky ruins, her mother stood next to a man with white hair. His chiseled features were turned away from the camera, and he appeared visibly annoyed, as if he hadn't wanted his picture taken.

He wasn't part of the astral corps.

The one thing over his muscular chest was a coat. There was only one man who dressed like this.

“...Salinger?!”

Alice still remembered his face, down to the details.

It was all because Iska and Rin had been locked in a brutal fight against this exact transcendental sorcerer, who had managed to break out of prison in Alcatroz.

She was shocked to find he hadn't changed in thirty years. More shocking was the fact that her mother was pictured next to him.

...Why?

...This sorcerer is the rotten criminal who attacked Nebulis VII thirty years ago.

Why was he pictured with the current queen? They looked almost as though they were military buddies.

“Mother?”

“As I said, there's nothing interesting in there.” The queen heaved out a heavy sigh from the bed, glancing at the photo book. “We *used* to be close. That's all—though it may seem laughable to you now.”

Used to be close...? It didn't seem as if they were in a rocky relationship in the picture. It was impossible to tell what events had transpired after the photo was taken.

“We were sparring partners.”

“Hmm?” Alice said.

“That man, as you know, can steal astral powers. He used to come after mine, and I would block him—for many a time.”

“...Uh-huh?”

It hadn't been just once? Why hadn't she tried to capture the sorcerer after the first time?

“At the time, I convinced myself that it would be a waste to apprehend him.”

“...Meaning...?”

“I wanted someone I could really go up against.”

“Ngh!”

“Someone who I could *show* my uninhibited strength and *take it*. In my youth, I was blindly focused on building my strength to bring carnage down on the Imperial forces. He was the worst kind of beast, making him the perfect challenger and rival.”

“_____” The hand holding the photo book started to tremble.

...I—

...*Mother...I feel...*

Alice wished she could scream.

I feel the same way.

“A ruffian who doesn’t treat me like I’m special. That’s the way you should be.”

“You considered me a rival, too.”

In the endless war with the Empire...in the claustrophobic construct of the conclave...mother and daughter were seeking someone to chase away their dull days.

In that way, they were the same.

Alice wanted to bellow out the swordsman’s name from the pits of her heart.

“But that was my *mistake*.”

Her mother’s words stung. Her thorny confession fettered the name that had nearly escaped Alice’s mouth and made her feel like it shot her in the chest.

“You know what happened, Alice.”

“...”

Thirty years ago, Salinger had infiltrated the palace to become a presence “greater than the queen herself” and struck Nebulis VII. The one who had repelled his assault and caged him in prison was none other than Nebulis IIX.

In other words, the queen in front of Alice—Mirabella.

“The final fight was brutal. Even among our duels, it was the most banal and debased of them all.”

“...But I thought he was your perfect rival?”

“Not in our last battle. It wasn’t what I wanted.” The queen stretched out her hand, plucking the book from Alice’s hands and storing it back on the shelf as if to say, *That’s enough*. “Our duels were something beyond our respective social standings. Our astral powers were at our peak. We were stubborn. That’s what I liked.”

“_____”

“In the end, he became a felon by assailing the seventh queen. And I had to purge him as the princess. It became good against evil. Convict versus the police. I regret that our relationship became something that was so...normal.”

The queen lay facedown on the bed. She buried her head in a pillow.

“Alice.”

“Yes?”

“You stopped that man in the thirteenth state. Did he say anything to you?”

“...Uh... Hmm.” Alice sorted through her memories in a fluster.

The transcendental sorcerer had been apprehended by Princess Aliceliese, according to the public report. In actuality, the one who had engaged in battle with him was the former Saint Disciple Iska.

...I didn’t get a chance to talk to Iska then.

...What did Rin tell me again?

Rin had reported her full conversation with the sorcerer. If there was a part that raised brows...

“She isn’t the one to fear in the Nebulis line. You haven’t even noticed the true monster created by the Founder’s bloodline. How pitiful.”

“Huh?!”

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing...!” Alice lied, but she didn’t think the pounding in her chest would calm anytime soon.

It hadn’t even registered back then, but now she knew. Now that she’d heard the firsthand account of Vichyssoise, Alice knew what it was.

...A true monster created by the Founder’s bloodline?

...Is that Vichyssoise from the Hydra?

Rin had told her the witch had turned into a beast, something inhuman.

A fiend born from the Hydra, coming from the bloodline of the Founder. That was exactly what Salinger had said.

...It was like...a prophecy.

...Why would an imprisoned sorcerer be able to foretell the appearance of Vichyssoise?

Sweat beaded on her face.

This was all part of a scheme undetected by the Lou.

Somewhere without the queen and Alice, there was a secret plot in motion. That had just cemented in Alice’s mind.

Where could the prisoner at large be right now? With what goal in mind had he escaped from behind bars?

“...”

Something beeped on the table next to the bed, indicating an incoming call.

“...It’s not mine. Alice, it’s for you.”

“Rin?”

An emergency call at this time of night? What could have happened?

“Rin, what’s wrong?”

“My apologies for disturbing you at this hour. I wanted to report that Lady Sisbell has just retired to her quarters. And one other matter: She intends to head to the central state tomorrow as planned.”

The queen nodded from beside Alice. The princess placed the device on the bed so they could both listen to it.

“Her train number and seat are just as I reported to you this afternoon. I will travel with them in hiding, and she will also have her guards.”

“...All four of them, right?”

“Yes. Mercenaries she hired in the independent state of Alsamira.”

Well, an Imperial unit, but they were trying to keep that detail from the queen. This whole thing did not sit right with Alice, but she could trust Iska to act as Sisbell’s guard while they traveled.

...I don’t like that Sisbell is clinging onto him.

...But it’ll all be over tomorrow.

They could finally put an end to this when Sisbell arrived in the central state. All outstanding issues would be resolved. The culprit of the coup and the mystery of Vichyssoise would be instantly confirmed with her powers.

“Rin,” said the queen.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Thank you for the report. I will put my direct reports on standby at the terminal tomorrow, so please tell Sisbell to leave from the fourth gate.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. If that is all—”

The communication cut off. Placing the silent device back on the table, Alice let out a soft sigh.

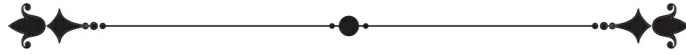
...There are so many things on my mind—from the coup to Salinger’s cryptic comment.

...But we need to wait until tomorrow.

She needed to be patient until her sister returned.

Come tomorrow, these mysteries would be solved.

CHAPTER 2



Call Me Elletear

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Central state.

The terminal station, Sacraris Nebulica.

The passengers aboard the train could catch a glimpse of its ice-white dome.

Sisbell stared out the window, perched in the middle seat of a three-seater. To disguise her identity, she was in glasses, with her hair swept up into a ponytail like Nene's.

...Guess you can't disguise cute.

...She's already been hit on three times during this train ride.

Across from her, Iska was hiding behind nonprescription glasses. He wore a shirt he'd bought in the Sovereignty, and his astral swords were in arm's reach, stored in a golf bag.

"Iska," Nene said. "All clear in the fourth car. Jhin? How's it looking on your end?"

"All good in the second car. Only issue is this kid, who's been wailing in my ear, but I haven't seen anyone suspicious. How's the front, boss?"

"...Nom nom... Uh-huh. This barbecue sandwich is delicious."

"I'm not asking about your lunch."

"Th-that was obviously just a joke! Everything is fine. The operator has kept his composure, and there hasn't been anything weird going on."

“Keep your head in the game. This is the final day. If we wrap this up quick, our mission will be over in a few hours. Then we can get the hell out of this country.” Jhin’s voice came over the earphone.

Iska and Sisbell were in the third car. Jhin and Nene were in the cars sandwiching them. Commander Mismis was on standby in the front.

...Plus Rin.

...She should be somewhere on this train under Alice’s orders.

“We will be arriving shortly,” announced the strawberry blonde, turning toward him slowly, as if she could read his mind. “The queen’s envoy should be waiting at the fourth gate. Arrangements have been made for me to ride in her car back to the royal palace.”

“Can you trust this envoy?”

“Yes.” She nodded before lowering her voice. “She’s Shuvalts’s cousin—an older woman named Swan.”

“...Sure.”

“Shuvalts’s family has served us for generations. But such a thing has never happened in our care. How could I even begin to apologize about Shuvalts to Swan...?”

They still had not received word back from Sisbell’s attendant. They had confirmed through the queen’s message—received via Rin—that he had not yet arrived at the palace.

...I’m certain something happened to him.

...I suspect Vichyssoise from the Hydra. Or Lord Mask of the Zoa.

There were three Nebulis bloodlines.

Before he had come to serve as Sisbell’s guard, Iska hadn’t imagined there was such a bloody feud for the throne.

...I’m sure Sisbell will continue to fight for it even after she gets back to the palace.

...Not that it should concern an Imperial soldier like me.

In a few more hours, Iska and Sisbell would become enemies once again, returning to their relationship as an Imperial soldier and a witch princess. Just like Iska and Alice.

“Just to confirm, we only need to bring you close enough to the royal palace to see it.”

“Yes, but I’ll give this to you now.”

“?”

“Half of the promised reward.”

Sisbell produced a paper package from her handbag. It was about small enough to hide within Iska’s two hands.

“Adhesives made of Nebula, which blocks astral energy. As long as it doesn’t naturally loosen from your skin, it’ll be effective. I’d recommend switching it out once a week, however. I only have twenty on hand, so that’s all I can give you.”

“...”

“I have the remaining half of your reward. I will give this to you once we reach the palace.”

It was a handwritten note that detailed how to acquire Nebula, which was required to make the adhesive, and a list of merchants who would undertake requests to make the product. Both were required for Commander Mismis to continue life in the Empire.

“...Are you sure?” Iska asked.

“It isn’t a problem if you know this information. In fact, I wouldn’t mind giving this to you now.” There was the hint of a smile on her face. “I know you’re not the type to betray me as soon as you’re granted your reward. Your friends, too.”

“...I don’t know what to say.”

“Iska.” Her eyes—speckled gold—stared into his soul. Her glossy lips were about to part to say something...

“We will arrive at the terminal shortly.”

With the announcement, the train clacked, dropping speed and chugging into the looming dome.

“Iska,” Nene called out. “We’re here.”

“We’re heading out, boss.”

“W-wait! Wait! Where’d I put my ticket?”

Nene, Jhin, and Commander Mismis were making their way to the third car. Sisbell got to her feet when she saw them, and Iska followed her, carrying her suitcase and his own astral swords in the golf bag.

The first floor of the terminal was lined with luxury stores, like the inside of a palatial department store. With its travelers and businessmen, it could almost be mistaken for a station in the Empire.

“Iska, this way, please.” Sisbell strolled straight through the sprawling station. It seemed all too easy to get lost in here. “The fourth gate is that way. It’s closest to the palace, so there are reserved spaces for the royal family’s private cars.”

“And the envoy’s supposed to be there?”

“Yes, and—eek?!” Sisbell shrieked quietly.

When she’d turned to face Iska, she’d failed to notice the woman walking in front of her.

“I-I’m sorry. I wasn’t look... Huh...?” Sisbell turned to face forward again, looking up at the tall woman standing in front of her.

She froze in place.

“Oh my.”

“...Ah... Wha...? Wha...?”

“Look where you’re walking, Sisbell. See? Your disguise is slipping now that you’ve bumped into me. Here.” The woman righted Sisbell’s glasses.

From farther behind, Nene and Mismis gasped involuntarily.

“Whoa. Look, Nene! She’s so pretty!”

“Holy... She’s got even bigger boobs than you, Commander. Well, I guess you win if it’s a height-to-boobs ratio.”

“Don’t be mean!”

No one was as beautiful as the young lady standing in front of Sisbell. Even fellow women gasped in awe.

“Call me Elletear.” The woman smiled warmly.

Her big, loose emerald curls had a golden sheen. Her features were perfectly proportional, and she seemed to be capable of capturing anyone’s soul with one look. She was even taller than Alice—whose height Iska was very familiar with—and her bodice seemed to strain against her chest, which threatened to tear through the fabric at any moment.

“...S-Sis...?!”

“Welcome home, Sisbell. I was very worried.” The woman named Elletear fondly stroked the head of the petite princess.

When she finally regained her senses, Sisbell immediately scrambled back to where she’d come from, mouth slack in shock. She turned away from crowding passersby.

“Sisbell?!”

“This way. Hurry!” Sisbell had jumped into the third car. It was the one they’d been riding in before, but it was empty. The other passengers had already disembarked.

Out of breath, Sisbell finally turned around.

“Hey, what’s going on here? Is that your sister?” Jhin asked.

“What...?” Nene gasped. “Th-that supermodel is your sister? Is she here to pick you up?”

“W-wait! Wait. What’s happening?!”

Iska fled into the car, followed by Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis.

“Good thinking. The station is full of prying eyes. I suppose confidential matters would best be addressed in the train. Prudent judgment, Sisbell.” The

tall woman came into the train car, emerald hair blowing behind her. She looked straight at the princess. “I heard your attendant disappeared. You have had your share of troubles, Sisbell.”

“—Gh!” Sisbell’s shoulders violently shook before she screamed as if her mental dam had burst. “What do you mean, Elletear?!”

She did not sound happy. Sisbell sounded like a guard dog barking at a stranger.

“I was informed the queen’s envoy would come to receive me at the terminal. Why are *you* here?!”

“Why?” Elletear’s smile remained plastered on her face. “It’s only natural to worry about one’s baby sister.”

“...Is that the only reason?”

“There is one other reason. I wished to thank all the escorts who guarded you while you were attendant-less.”

Her beautiful eyes swept from Iska to the sniper, the mechanic, and the commander.

“Call me Elletear. I’m her older sister. I would like to welcome you to our country from your distant nation.”

“...Are you part of the royal family’s envoy, too?” Jhin asked.

“I’m of the same standing as Sisbell.” Elletear smiled at him.

It was the perfect answer. From Jhin’s simple question, Elletear instantly realized Sisbell hadn’t revealed that she was a princess, so Elletear answered in a way that would work under any circumstance.

It was all too natural for her.

If she had faltered even in the slightest, Jhin would have picked up on it. Iska was the only person who knew Sisbell’s true identity.

...Sisbell’s sister. That must mean she’s also a princess.

...There were three of them all along!

He could tell Sisbell was the younger sister based on their conversations. In

other words, either Elletear or Alice had to be the eldest sibling.

...My bet is on Elletear.

...Her appearance and attitude seem more adult.

Even Iska could tell Princess Alice was beautiful in a cute way, and there was something graceful about her appearance. However, this Elletear seemed more mature in body and mind. Her face practically *radiated* maturity.

Alice was still too inexperienced to be a match for Sisbell, but Elletear... She could smooth over Sisbell's aggressive threats. Her patience seemed to know no bounds.

"...My dear sister, I'm in a hurry." The little sister fixed her older sibling with a glare. At some point, Sisbell had started to speak snippily, possibly from bewilderment or agitation. "I must meet with Her Majesty's envoy and immediately make my way to the palace."

"Oh, right," Elletear chirped, touching her cheek as if in surprise. "It won't be long until this train will need to make its way to the depot. We should wrap up our discussion before the conductor comes to check the cars."

"...We still have things to discuss?"

"Obviously. Didn't I say I wanted to talk to everyone here?"

Sisbell refused to lower her guard. The princess with emerald hair focused her gaze once more on the soldiers.

"Well then, I received a report at the palace. I heard you are mercenaries from the independent state of Alsamira. And that Sisbell has hired you."

There was a moment of silence.

Jhin was the one to nod, talking for all of them. "That's right. We took her request there."

"Oh, then I may have been mistaken, I suppose."

"?"

"I was convinced you were an *Imperial unit*. I thought you were the unit formed with Saint Disciple Iska, the one who freed Sisbell from captivity a year

ago.”

“Huh?!”

It was impossible not to show visible signs of distress. Nene and Commander Mismis audibly gulped, Jhin narrowed his eyes, and Iska couldn’t hold back a shudder.

They wanted to believe they had misheard her, but they were certain she had just said “Saint Disciple Iska.”

“Um...?” Sisbell seemed unstable on her feet. The blood had drained from her face, and her lips turned blue. “Wh-what are you saying...? These people are—”

“There was a time when I was close with the Imperial army. But let’s keep that between us.” She folded her arms, pushing her breasts together, before the purebred let out a little chuckle. “Obviously, my mind and body are loyal to the Sovereignty. I was a double agent who pretended to be a traitor for the Empire.”

“You did what...?”

“Alas, Imperial headquarters saw through my little scheme. I have long since split from the Imperial forces, but it’s granted me some intel on their forces. Plus, all my channels to *send* information to the Empire are still active.”

So why don’t you drop the charade? The witch seemed to hint she knew who they were.

“Wouldn’t it be horrible if this got out to the queen, Sisbell?”

“What?!”

“A few hundred people in the terminal must have watched you working in concert with these people. We won’t even need Lord Mask’s eyewitness testimony. Don’t you see the reputation of the Lou would be burned to the ground if these people came forward?”

“...” Sisbell had no response. Her lips were pale, and her slender shoulders were quivering.

“I have a single request for all of you,” Elletear continued to say to Unit 907. “It’s not a difficult one. If you humored my sister, I think you’ll consider hearing

me out. Otherwise—”

“You’ll tattle on us to Imperial headquarters, huh?” Jhin muttered.

“I’ll leave that to your imagination. I assume that would pose some problems for you. An Imperial unit guarding a witch? Just think of the commotion it would cause if headquarters were to know.” Elletear winked at him, sounding thrilled, as if she was relishing in playing mind games.

...She was a double agent for the Imperial forces?

...I find that unbelievable. Her confession makes me more suspicious.

Elletear was the queen’s daughter.

If the princess was in contact with the Imperial forces, she would be stripped of her title if Sisbell went behind her back and reported it to the queen.

...Elletear knew immediately who I was.

...So she must be in some kind of communication with the Imperial forces.

That was exactly why they couldn’t turn down her request.

If they so much as offended her, Elletear could immediately report Unit 907 to the Imperial headquarters. Then they would really have no place to return to.

“Well, Sisbell, I’m very sorry,” Elletear soothed, planting a hand on her sister’s dainty shoulder. “They cannot disobey me. Your guards are mine now.”

Sisbell’s saving grace had instantly been seized by her older sister. Was there anyone other than a witch who could conjure something so devious?

Most shocking of all was that this woman was Alice’s older sister.

...They’re nothing like each other.

...Elletear is completely different from Alice and Sisbell.

The other two sisters had come to Iska with emotional appeals, even if it meant being brutally honest.

As for the eldest sibling...Iska was reminded of the *Eight Great Apostles*, who served as the ultimate authorities of the Empire and bent the will of others using any possible type of coercion.

“...Sister,” Sisbell managed to say in a strangled voice thick with emotion. “... Don’t you know what would happen if I were to tell the queen about your statements?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I may have done something unbefitting of my standing, but I was confident this was the right choice! Meanwhile, you’re out there, conspiring with the Empire! Isn’t that an unforgivable offense?!”

Verbal sword tips were leveled at each other’s throats. If either of them exposed the other person’s secret, they would meet the same fate.

“Hee-hee. Don’t look at me that way, Sisbell. I have your best interests at heart. After all, leading an Imperial unit into the palace is something that’s unpardonable. I, naturally, would have to stop you from following through with your plan.” The eldest daughter softly slapped Sisbell on the shoulder. “I’m proposing this for your sake.”

“...Wh-what are you talking about?!”

“Just listen to my request.”

They had no option but to hear her out.

Elletear had realized they were an Imperial unit. If they resisted her, they would instantly be surrounded by the astral corps. Even if they were able to escape, she would disclose their actions to Imperial headquarters, and they would lose their only home.

...We’re in no position to refuse.

...What’s she planning, now that she knows we’re Imperial soldiers?

Did she want them to betray the Empire? Or would she simply arrest them here?

“This is going to be fun.” Under suffocating tension, the eldest princess had on a devilish smile. “I would like you all to vacation at the Lou family villa.”

“—?”

What was that? Nene and Mismis blinked blankly back at her.

Jhin openly scowled at Elletear as she continued.

“I’d like to thank you for bringing my little sister to safety by extending this invitation to you. You will neither be restrained nor interrogated.”

“...E-excuse me?” Commander Mismis seemed hesitant. “Uh, um...s-so you’re saying...”

“That’s right. I’ll have you spend ten days living the high life at our luxurious villa. After that, I will return all of you to the Empire.”

“—That’s enough!” cried out the youngest princess. Her voice was amplified by the empty train car. “I don’t understand what you could possibly be thinking. You want to take them to the family villa, knowing they’re part of an Imperial unit?!”

“Indeed. I want to accommodate the team as thanks for protecting my dear sister.”

“Then we should do that at the royal palace.”

“Are you suggesting we welcome them to the blown-up remains of the Queen’s Space?”

“...Gah?!”

“It would be dangerous to have guests at the palace when revolution could break out at any moment. Besides, inviting an Imperial unit might put our state secrets in danger of being exposed.”

“...” Sisbell was rendered silent.

Elletear had a point. Any princess had to admit they couldn’t let an enemy unit approach the palace.

“...You’re right.”

“I’m happy you’ve being reasonable, Sisbell. You’ve always been smart.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to banish these Imperial soldiers?!” Sisbell asked. “Why invite them to the villa, knowing they’re our enemy?!”

“You think I’m being irrational?”

“Obviously!”

“Hee-hee. You’re so funny.” Elletear covered her smile with her hand. “You’re the one who’s being irrational—by hiring an Imperial unit.”

“...Th-that was because...!” Sisbell gritted her teeth.

“Fret not, for I am your ally,” Elletear assured. “You must have had your reasons. That said, I can’t just let them wander our country. It poses a national security concern.”

“...”

“So I am inviting them to the villa. I will justify it by saying we are keeping an Imperial unit *away from the palace*. And I’ll be listening in on you at the villa for ten days.”

The witch turned around, gazing into the faces of Iska, Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis.

“Imperial soldiers or not, you protected my precious sister. That is a fact. I just want to ask you some simple questions, and then I’ll release you if I see no problems.”

“So you’re taking us to a ‘villa’—basically a glorified prison—for a ‘vacation,’ which is your way of saying an interrogation,” Jhin said sarcastically.

“Not at all. I’ve already invited the best chefs in the nation to entertain us,” she coolly replied. “Oh, yes, and, Sisbell, you must also come.”

“...Huh?”

“I imagine you’re worried I’ll be treating them poorly. You should come along.”

“B-but I need to go...to the palace...”

“Absolutely not. Gotcha!” Elletear captured Sisbell in a big hug before she could resist. Elletear didn’t seem to mind that her sister’s face was totally buried in her chest.

“...S-Sister?! What are you—?!”

“Sisbell, you need some rest. If you return to the palace, I’m positive you’ll collapse from exhaustion. You may return once you have taken a break.”

“...B-but...”

“Your assailant, Vichyssoise, is in custody. Activities by Zoa and Hydra have been suspended, so Her Majesty is safe. Especially with Alice there.”

“...”

The older sister genially cradled Sisbell against her chest.

Iska swore she looked like a boa snake constricting her prey for the briefest of seconds. Or was he just imagining things?

“We will all go to the villa. We haven’t had uninterrupted family time in so long. Aren’t you excited?”

In the shadows of the deserted fourth car, which was the railway carriage behind Iska’s group...

“...Lady Elletear?!”

Rin had been eavesdropping on their conversation from the other side of the door.

She couldn’t use the communications device on hand for fear that Elletear might overhear the conversation.

“Why the family villa?”

Apparently to keep the soldiers away from the royal palace.

Rin could see Elletear’s reasoning. In fact, the attendant had been planning to stop them before they could get too close to the palace grounds. But why go out of her way to invite them to a villa?

Elletear was taking things too far.

...We’re basically giving the enemy a seat at our family table!

...Even Lady Alice put Iska up in a hotel room when she captured him!

There were several bits of classified intelligence even in the family villa. Elletear was practically saying she would lay that bare for the Imperial forces.

“Lady Elletear, I knew you were acting strange...!”

The eldest princess had already been acting suspicious as it was. She had allegedly disclosed Sisbell's whereabouts to the Zoa when Sisbell had made her way to the independent state of Alsamira.

"Lord Mask?! Wh-why are you here...?"

"Just on a holiday. I wanted to forget all about what's happening in the country. There shouldn't be anything strange about that."

That trip had been a personal request from the queen. The only ones privy to it were the few who had been told directly by her—Rin, Alice, and the queen's close associates, who had all remained in her line of sight.

All except for the eldest princess.

...The traitor disclosed Lady Sisbell's location to the Zoa and the Empire.

...Lady Sisbell will be able to uncover their identity with her astral power.

In other words, Elletear was obstructing any investigation into the truth.

On the outside, she was inviting the soldiers to the villa for a simple interrogation.

"But her true target is Lady Sisbell! This must be an excuse to keep her from ever reaching the palace!"

Trailing behind Sisbell and the Imperial unit, whom Elletear was leading to the sixth gate, Rin gritted her back teeth.

2

The Queen's Space.

Alice listened carefully to Rin's report in a hall flooded with the light of the evening sun. She had just been waiting for her sister's arrival with the queen.

"So you're saying...Sisbell was taken to the family villa?"

"Yes. Forgive me for drawing my own conclusions, but my intuition is telling me it was with the intent to keep Lady Sisbell from returning to the palace."

"..."

The family villa was on the outskirts of the central state. Though it was accessible within two hours by car, which allowed the family to rush back to the palace in a pinch, it was certainly in a remote district.

...But it's enough of a distance between Sisbell and the palace.

...And it's close enough for Elletear to return home at a moment's notice.

It was an intermediary distance—neither too far nor too close. Alice never would have thought to use the villa to confine anyone.

“Mother, what shall we do...?”

“Alice, give me the communications device.”

She handed it to the queen.

“Rin, are you certain Elletear has not seen you?”

“Yes. I conducted myself so she would not.”

“Only you could pull that off. Please return to the palace for the time being. I will send an envoy for Elletear and tell her to return to the palace immediately.”

“Of course. However, Your Majesty, are you certain Lady Elletear will listen to an envoy...?”

Elletear was the eldest princess. There was a possibility she would scoff if one of the queen's workers told her to return.

“I will have Alice deliver the message. She is a princess, too, so she cannot be dismissed so easily.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Alice, you heard us. I'll leave Elletear to you.” The queen returned the communications device. “Elletear and Sisbell are at the villa with the four guards—mercenaries from another land. Be courteous to them.”

“...Oh.”

“? Is something the matter?”

“N-no! It's nothing!” Alice violently shook her head.

She had forgotten something incredibly important, because she'd been

preoccupied by Elletear. The Imperial unit was here.

...Which means Iska is here, too!

...Wait... The family villa? I have a bedroom there!

The room, naturally, contained her clothes and underwear. What if Iska was invited to use *her* room? He might even open her closet without thinking twice!

And then he would see everything.

There was no place safe from his prying eyes...including her hidden stash of more scandalous lingerie that she'd bought out of curiosity.

"This is a serious matter, Mother! A grave state of affairs! I swear to put a stop to Elletear!"

"Yes, Alice. There is something off about her behavior."

"...My underwear."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing, Mother." Alice feigned ignorance.

Even her underwear took a back seat to Elletear's weird behavior. Alice might even have a chance to speak with her sister alone at the villa.

It really didn't seem right to leave the palace, but she was the only one who could pull this off.

"Okay, Mother, I will—"

"Alice."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I imagine you will be the proprietor of this place around this time next year."

"...What?!" Alice felt unstable on her feet, crumpling to her knees.

She didn't need to ask her mother to repeat herself. What she was hinting at was obvious.

If Alice were the master of the Queen's Space...

...That means she thinks I will be queen!

...But I'm still too young! I'm only seventeen, and I'll turn eighteen later this year.

The first condition for the throne was power.

To win in the war against the Empire, the queen had to be young and impossibly strong. Several candidates in the royal family fulfilled that criteria.

...Plus, the conclave hasn't even begun!

...The Zoa and Hydra will have their own representatives competing for the throne.

Of course, Alice intended to become queen. It was her greatest wish to bring down the Empire and create a world without discrimination against the astral mages.

But wasn't this a little premature?

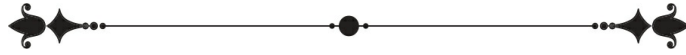
"...Mother—I mean, Your Majesty..."

"I'm saying you should act accordingly. Just keep that in mind," stated the queen. "I leave Elletear to you. I trust you to use the appropriate methods. Make sure to bring her back to the palace."

"...Yes."

Alice bowed once before leaving the Queen's Space.

INTERMISSION



Final Step of the Special Mission

The united stronghold, the Heavenly Empire.

Known as the Empire for short, the military state was led by the Imperial assembly under Lord Yunmelngen.

Over three miles underground was an assembly chamber accessible only by special elevators deep within the military affairs sector in the central base. It currently echoed with the voice of a non-assembly member.

“There’s three Nebulis bloodlines: the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra. They’ve elected generations of queens by way of the conclave...it seems.”

A single man was bathed in light.

“Basically, purebreds—witches and sorcerers who share the blood of the Founder.”

He produced no footsteps.

This man was a product of the Empire’s prided assassination unit, Special Division Six. He was known to be an expert in silent killing techniques that made no use of guns.

The Saint Disciple of the eighth seat. Nameless, the Invisible Hand of God.

Shrouded in a dark-gray suit from head to toe, he came to a stop at the edge of the round table.

“On the outside, they all act like royalty. But they’re actually locked in a rabid battle between themselves for the throne. Monsters will always be monsters. How sad.”

“Yeah? Well, I welcome monsters with open arms—if they make good prey.”

Next to the round table, a rugged soldier sat cross-legged on the ground. Though her frame was petite, the arms peeking from her tank top were hard as steel. Her long hair was in disarray, her skin was tanned, and the tips of her long canines poked out between her lips.

“Been a while since we worked together, huh, Names?”

“...*So you’re still alive, Mei.*”

“Ha-ha. Me? I’d spring back to life even if I died. Never has there been a more entertaining *witch hunt* in all of the Empire’s history.” She took a big bite of a biscuit that she fished out of a giant bag.

The Saint Disciple of the third seat. Mei, the Incessant Tempest. She was an Imperial soldier who had distinguished herself from the pack and risen to Saint Disciple from the Fifth Division—a group of fighters that trained in an undeveloped territory called “no-man’s-land.”

“...Ah.”

“Hmm? That was a loud sigh, Risya,” observed Mei. “Are you that excited to go to the Sovereignty with me?”

“No. I was just thinking about how I’ve been taking so many international trips lately. It’s so annoying. I’d rather stay in the Imperial capital forever.” Risya sighed loudly again, leaning over the table.

Risya In Empire. Her black-rimmed glasses suited her clever face. Though the tall woman was twenty-two like Mismis, she had risen to the Saint Disciple title at historic speed.

“I mean...,” mumbled Risya, facedown on the table, pointedly looking two seats over. “If Mr. First Seat is leaving the Lord’s side, I ought to hang around here as the staff officer for the throne.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Someone has a grudge. What can we do? The Lord already granted him permission.”

Both Risya and Mei were staring at a seated man carrying a thin, long sword. The redheaded swordsman sported a custom combat uniform combining armor with a coat.

The Saint Disciple of the first seat. Joheim, the Flash Knight.

He was usually tucked away in the Lord's offices, never leaving the side of the throne for even a moment.

"We haven't seen each other since the last gathering, huh, Jo?"

"..."

"Shy as ever. I wonder when the Lord will promote me to replace this guy. Right, Risyā?"

"That's up to the Lord."

"You're no fun." Mei chuckled the empty bag of biscuits at her.

All food and drink was prohibited in the Imperial assembly grounds. She was the only one to blatantly disregard this unwritten rule.

"What if I hunt down one of the witch leaders?" Mei asked.

"You mean the Nebulis queen? If you manage to pull that off...I guess the Lord might do something about your position. Well, the Lord would kind of have to."

"Yeah? In that case—"

"That's unnecessary," someone mumbled, cutting off the third seat.

His voice contained the harsh dissonance of metal grinding against metal.

"Hmm? Jo?"

"I hunt the queen." The swordsman's eyes were closed. "Isn't that right, Eight Great Apostles?"

"—We're just excited that you're excited."

"The special mission to capture the queen will move into its final stage today."

Vwoom. The monitors set up on the walls displayed the hazy outlines of eight people.

The Eight Great Apostles.

They unified the Imperial assembly and served as the supreme authorities of the Empire.

“Six days ago...”

“...A coup took place in their royal palace, as you’re aware. The Sovereignty is in shambles currently.”

“We, the Empire, will take advantage of this situation.”

There was an intranational plot for one of the bloodlines to assassinate the queen...and an international scheme for the elite Imperial forces to capture her.

It didn’t matter who succeeded. In either outcome, it would destroy the power balance between the Empire and Nebulis.

“Mei, are you ready?”

“Anytime, baby.” Mei licked the crumbs off her fingers. “The assassination units selected by Names and yours truly have sneaked their way into one of the neutral cities bordering the Sovereignty. All that’s left is to infiltrate. Which I think Risyia is handling?”

“Everything’s ready on my end.” Risyia propped up her head on her hand. “We’ve administered astral energy to the troops and checked on their artificial astral crests. They should be able to cross the border checkpoints without a problem.”

“Superb.”

“All according to plan.”

Applause rang out. It was an insipid ovation that seemed as though it had been cut from a movie scene.

“You’ll take the discussed route upon crossing the border.”

“Then split into eight formation patterns and make your way to the central state. Upon arrival, the groups will wait on standby in front of the palace.”

The Planetary Stronghold, where the descendants of the Founder resided, was a castle of mysteries that Imperial soldiers had never been able to infiltrate.

But they had obtained the palace blueprints this time.

“The palace is divided into four towers.”

“The Star Spire, the Moon Spire, and the Solar Spire. Then there is a main

castle referred to as the Queen's Palace."

"And you will target everything except the Solar Spire."

"—Hah!" Mei was unable to contain her laughter. "I just find that so funny. What were they called again? The Hydra? If we spare them, won't things be too obvious?"

The Hydra were *the traitors*.

They were the masterminds behind the coup to kill the queen and had brought this scheme to the Empire. This piece of classified information had been shared with some of the Saint Disciples earlier that morning.

"We'll capture the queen and burn down the palace, save for the Solar Spire. I think that's practically revealing everything."

"We don't need to worry about that."

"Your mission is simple. You shall invade the palace using our strongest soldiers and capture the queen and all those purebreds who accompany her."

"...You make it sound so simple..." Risya smiled wanly, flipping through the list of witches, which had been prepared ahead of time, on the round table.

This roster was just another thing provided by the Hydra.

"So the queen is A-class, Growley, the head of the Zoa, is B-class, Kissing is C-class... And the Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese, blah-blah-blah..."

This operation wasn't on "hard" mode. It was nearly impossible.

After all, the Imperial forces had never managed to catch a purebred in the century-long war. And the Eight Great Apostles were requesting they capture two...minimum.

"What do you mean? It isn't a big deal."

"We're not asking you to decimate the Sovereignty. You simply need to hunt down two witches or sorcerers."

"...Sounds like a hell of a big deal to me." Risya glanced at her colleague on the ground. "By the way, what's your plan, Mei?"

"Me? Nothing in particular. Just gonna play it by ear." She snorted, looking at

the witch list. “Aha. The Ice Calamity Witch, huh? Isn’t that the one that got away, Names? She almost got you.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” The man gave an empty reply from the edge of the round table. *“We’re not going to run into our desired targets. I’ll hunt them as they come at me.”*

“So you’re basically going with Plan Mei,” she trilled.

“It seems so.”

“Looks like we’re on the same wavelength. Wanna go out for a bite to eat after this?”

“Never,” Nameless spat, turning around, looking away from the Eight Great Apostles on the monitors.

“Heading out, Nameless?”

“You have some of the Empire’s best killing techniques. We anticipate you will act accordingly.”

Nameless did not respond.

Mei and Risya got up and left on separate elevators.

The red-haired swordsman had been left behind.

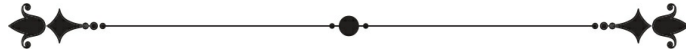
“Joheim, you’re going after the queen.”

“You may ignore the rest. She will certainly be in the Queen’s Space. Our only concern is that the Ice Calamity Witch may be with her—”

“She isn’t *there*.” The Saint Disciple opened his eyes. Adjusting his thin, long sword on his back, the Flash Knight stood up.

“The Ice Calamity Witch is currently *not* in the palace.”

CHAPTER 3



Three-Sister War—Alice's Tantrum

1

Nebulis Sovereignty. Central state.

Snowy vales stretched into the distant horizon in the woody countryside.

...It's been three hours.

...We've been driving nonstop since she forced us into the car at the terminal.

The metallic luxury car carried Iska's three colleagues from his Imperial unit and Sisbell. Elletear was in front, driving. The sky was starting to turn red. It wouldn't be long until nightfall.

Were they really making the right choice here? Iska wasn't the only one asking himself that question. He imagined Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis were all mulling it over in their heads.

"We're almost there." Sisbell, who had been persistently silent, lifted her head up.

They went past an old stone wall to a field with two parked cars.

Commander Mismis got out of the vehicle, twirling around. "Huh? This isn't a field. Is this...?"

"Our garden."

"A garden?! B-but...it could easily be a sports ground!"

"It's nothing impressive." Sisbell stood in the middle of the extensive lawn, looking blasé. "A century ago, this was all undeveloped land discovered by our ancestor. There's more land here than one could want."

“...I-I see,” Mismis stuttered. The commander had no idea how to respond.

After all, the Imperial forces were the ones who had persecuted and cast out the astral mages from Imperial territory.

“And this beautiful castle...?”

“That’s our villa.”

An old white fortress was encircled by a sprawling lawn—too small to be a real castle, but absurdly large for a vacation home.

“...It’s like a hundred times bigger than my room,” Iska said.

“Hmm? Maybe your room is just tiny. I would like to see it.” Sisbell broke into a smile for the first time in a while.

The emerald-haired princess turned around. “I’m sure you are all tired from your long journey. Welcome to the Lou Erz mansion.”

Her long hair and dress blew in the wind, which smelled faintly of grass. As she smiled with the crimson expanse of sky behind her, she seemed as if she could upstage a movie star.

“This mansion will be your home. Feel free to ask for anything during your stay.”

“I have a question,” Jhin immediately said. “Do you own this place?”

“That would be my mother,” the eldest princess replied without a moment’s delay. “She is also an envoy, though she is absent. Sisbell and I will give you all a warm reception with the rest of the staff.”

Elletear stood in front of the door.

Iska almost yelped in surprise when the door opened automatically as soon as she rang the bell.

...So it’s mechanical.

...It looks like an old castle, but the inside might be all automated.

He’d thought there hadn’t been much security, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. State-of-the-art surveillance cameras and defense devices had to be set up all over the place.

“Come on in,” Elletear urged, herding them inside.

Two colossal stone statues waited for them in the hall. As soon as Iska stepped onto the floor—polished to shine like a mirror—a melodious male voice bounced off the ceiling, which glittered from the light of the chandelier.

“Imperial soldiers. To think you’d step into this trap on your own.”

“Prepare yourselves.”

Lord Mask?!

He was the one who had kicked Mismis into the vortex. If Lord Mask hadn’t been in Alsamira, Sisbell would have never been in her current predicament. He was an old enemy, someone who had history with Iska, second only to Alice.

“So this was an ambush?!” shouted Iska, immediately leaping up.

Jhin, who had come in behind everyone else, kicked open the door behind them. Nene and Commander Mismis peered into the garden.

Meanwhile, Iska’s eyes darted around the hall, searching for the masked man.

Except...no one was there.

Other than the two stone statues, the hallway was entirely empty. They caught sight of neither Lord Mask nor one of his cronies.

“N-no one’s...in the garden!” shouted Nene, observing the grounds outside.

They were convinced they’d been surrounded from the outside...but there were just two cars out on the lawn.

...What’s going on?

...I thought I heard his voice, but I don’t get the feeling that anyone’s going to attack.

Heavy silence settled over them. The strawberry-blond witch snapped open her eyes.

“I’m guessing you produced that voice with your astral power...,” Sisbell accused her sister.

“Hee-hee. I suppose I took it too far.” Elletear let out peals of laughter as

though the situation were comical.

All eyes focused on her.

What was going on?

“Forgive me, Imperial soldiers. That was just a one-woman show. It’s simple... A terrible habit of mine.” The witch seemed rapt with amusement. “I bet you were all wondering about my astral powers, seeing that you’re going to spend a considerable amount of time in a mansion with a ‘witch.’ You never know if I’ll try to pull a fast one on you in your sleep.”

“...” The members of Unit 907 were silent.

They couldn’t get a clear read on Elletear’s intentions. Was this witch willingly exposing the secrets of her own astral power?

“So that voice just now was all you?” Jhin asked.

“Very observant. Think of my power like a parrot. I imagine it’s the *most useless power* in all the royal family.” Elletear nodded. “It’s a cheap parlor trick. So sleep easy. I won’t scheme behind your backs during this vacation. My astral power couldn’t even harm a baby.”

“...Deprecating yourself?”

“Hmm, I have never thought of it that way before. I genuinely feel *grateful* for my powers.”

Elletear rang a bell in the hall. Before it stopped ringing, the servant girls quickly filed down from the stairs in the back. Five of them in total. Each wore a housekeeping uniform just like Rin’s.

“Relax. These are just the servants of the Lou,” whispered Sisbell to Iska when she saw the look on his face. “Yumilecia, Ashe, Noel, Sistia, and Nami. All astral mages, but they can’t use attack magic.”

“You mean the servants don’t act as guards?”

“If you’re thinking of Rin, she’s a special case. It’s unusual for one to simultaneously serve as an attendant and guard.”

Speaking of Rin...Iska hadn’t seen her since they’d hopped on the same train

to the central state.

...Is she hiding somewhere?

...I imagine Rin could have followed us here without any problems.

Alice must have been filled in on the latest.

“...What if Alice came with her? Oh, she would never...”

“Iska?”

“Oh, nothing!” Iska snapped to his senses.

He’d been off his A game lately. Why was his head in the clouds whenever Alice came into the equation? He never intended to lower his guard.

...Get a grip, dude. I’m way too obviously interested in Alice.

...I need to focus my energy being careful in this mansion!

Even if Elletear and the five servants couldn’t use attack spells, there had to be some hidden guards...or the mansion itself had to have some secret security mechanism embedded into it.

In the end, Iska’s unit was comprised of soldiers from an enemy nation. They couldn’t forget where they stood.

“We have prepared rooms for our honored guests.”

The servants bowed.

“We will entertain you as guests only to oblige Lady Elletear’s orders, cursed soldiers. Come this way.”

“...O-okay.”

That sounded like a thinly veiled threat. The five girls seemed ready to drive knives into their enemies’ hearts as soon as they lowered their guard.

“I’m so sorry, Iska,” Elletear trilled. “It seems it’s been too long since we’ve had guests. Our servants must be nervous.”

“Nervous? Sure...”

“Ashe, these are our guests. I won’t stand for your behavior. Especially if you mix mud into their coffee.”

“You’re basically instigating it!”

“At most, you may spike it with detergent.”

“That’s worse!”

“—This way, please.”

Four of the servants lined up next to Iska, Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis, guiding them up the steps of the great hall. Elletear watched them venture farther into the mansion with a smile.

In the palace courtyard was a grove of thick trees with dewy leaves and fresh flowers dotting the garden. Cadillac One was parked.

Bulletproof glass. Armored plating. A sealed cabin to protect against poisonous gas. It was a custom car built to handle any surprise attack.

“Rin, let’s go!”

“P-please wait for me, Lady Alice! I only just returned to the palace!”

Alice wore her dress reserved for outings.

Rin was struggling, balancing two enormous bags, desperately trying to keep up with her lady.

“Lady Alice, I’m terribly sorry to bring this up, but did you know Lady Elletear was up to this?”

“Not a clue. I mean, she shut herself away in her room, claiming she wasn’t feeling well. My mother and I were preoccupied with other things, like Vichyssoise.”

“I hate to say it, but that sounds...”

“In hindsight, it definitely seems suspicious.”

There was a big chance that she made up her illness as an excuse.

Upon pulling a fast one on the queen and Alice, Elletear had sneaked to the terminal to wait for Sisbell, which meant...

“Just to confirm, Rin: Was Elletear the only one at the station?”

“Y-yes!”

Alice hopped into the car with Rin. The driver was a family attendant. They didn't have to censor themselves in this barricaded space.

“...What could my sister be thinking?”

Cadillac One lurched forward. Alice bit her lip, watching the scene change beyond the bulletproof glass.

“And Iska is at the villa with Sisbell, right?”

“Right. I can see you find it totally detestable that Imperial soldiers are staying at your vacation home.”

“...Uh-huh.” Alice was mostly just thinking of her own room.

What was she going to do? Her secret underwear stash was tucked deep in her closet... Adult goods that she wouldn't be caught dead wearing in the palace.

Call it girlish curiosity. Even a sheltered maiden had her rebellious phase.

“...No one can know about this.” Alice stealthily balled her hand into a fist.

2

The Lou Erz mansion. Eastern wing. Second floor.

“This was the Salon of the Archers, was it?”

It was as if they were in a five-star hotel. Iska cautiously inspected a perfectly made bed.

“What if they sprinkled shards of glass on the pillows or something? I just hope there's no poison in the water pots. No use thinking too much about it. I mean, they already know I'm an Imperial soldier...”

It had been barely under an hour since they had shown him to his room. He hadn't found anything strange up to this point, but he couldn't completely trust his room was safe.

“Jhin will be fine on his own, but I wonder if the commander and Nene will be

okay. My communicator...oh, right. We had to forfeit those.”

They had handed over all their equipment—their communicators, Jhin’s gun, even Iska’s astral swords. Elletear claimed she would return them on the final day of their “vacation.”

“ ...”

A quaint townscape was visible from the window. He couldn’t see anything that looked even remotely like the palace, but he could make out the indistinct buildings of the central state ahead on the horizon.

...If I want to escape, I’d be able to easily get out from the window.

...It’s like we’re birds in an open cage.

Even if they made a break for it, they were in enemy territory. Plus, everything would be over if word got out to the Imperial headquarters that they’d guarded a witch.

If you would like to escape, be my guest. Elletear’s smile seemed to float into his mind, even when he closed his eyes.

Clunk...

“Iska,” someone whispered from outside the door. “Are you all right?”

“Sisbell?”

“These are our guest rooms. I don’t think they would do anything disrespectful...”

The strawberry blonde quickly slipped into the room. Like Iska, she scrupulously inspected the pillows and bed.

“Nothing in the living room,” she observed.

“...Like no traps?”

“I mean, listening devices.”

“ ...”

“What’s gotten into you? It’s strange to see you let your jaw hang open.”

“...I just never thought I’d hear you say that, Sisbell. I took a look earlier, but

nothing turned up.”

Iska had been cautious about that. He’d conducted a thorough search for bugs and surveillance cameras upon entry. An hour later, he still came up empty.

...Sisbell is a princess, so this villa is practically hers.

...I thought my unit would be the only ones on guard.

“If anyone were to use them, it would be my sister. I also don’t trust her.”

The princess sat on the sofa.

Iska was surprised by her claim. “Even though she’s family?”

“Yes. At present, she is at the top of the suspect list for leaking my location to Lord Mask. Next would be my older sister Alice... But I would rate Elletear a seven or eight, and Alice a three or four on my suspicion scale.”

“As your guard, what should we keep an eye out for?”

“Listening devices first. Then surveillance cameras. Lucky for us, it seems there are none here.”

Sisbell traced over the ceiling with her eyes. If there was even a tiny pinprick somewhere, there was a chance that a camera was set up on the other side.

“She’s trying to create proof that a princess is colluding with Imperial forces. In short, she’s hoping to capture the moment I divulge national secrets to you—or the opposite.”

“You mean she wants to catch me giving you ours?”

“We need to stay vigilant. Assume my sister has betrayed my family.”

Sisbell did have a point.

The eldest princess must have had some motive for bringing her sister and her guards to this mansion using blackmail.

“I don’t know if it’s right for an Imperial subject to ask this, but...is her astral power like a recording device that can reproduce sounds?”

“More like she can mimic voices,” Sisbell told him without hesitation. “I think I

can tell you, since she's already revealed it herself. My sister can create voices she's heard in the past. Like the voice of Lord Mask. It's just an impersonation, so she can make them say anything."

"So she can say things that have been said and things that haven't?"

"Yes. But because she can manipulate speech, nothing ever serves as concrete evidence."

"Oh...I see."

The power of Illumination could re-create events of the past, and because Sisbell couldn't change history, she was trusted by the royal family in investigations.

The eldest sister's ability did not have that advantage.

...So it really is just an imitation.

...That's no different from the street performers in neutral cities doing impersonations.

It served no *utility*.

"Had she been an ordinary citizen, that would have been perfectly fine. But my sister is the eldest princess. No one is impressed by a copycat."

"So it's a power that's unfitting for a princess?"

To put it frankly, it didn't seem like a power that would be held by one of the Founder's descendants.

...I thought all purebreds were powerful without exception.

...It's not just me. The Imperial headquarters have been cautious of them because of that.

In battle, the powers of the Ice Calamity Witch Aliceliese and the Witch of Thorns Kissing were devastating. Nothing was as terrifying as Lord Mask's ability to travel through space. Even Sisbell's Illumination had the potential to obtain information that could change the course of the war.

...But there's an exception, it seems.

...Of all people, the eldest princess wound up with her skill.

Elletear must have revealed her powers partly because she hated her skill. There was no merit in concealing it.

“She said it herself: ‘I imagine it’s the *most useless power* in all the royal family.’”

“Yes,” Sisbell said. “And that’s the truth. I cannot expose the powers of other members in our family, but even the retainers gossip that her powers are pointless.” Sisbell put on a forced smile. “It’s ironic. My sister has it all—as a conversationalist, a scholar, a debutante, a jaw-dropping beauty. If she only had a better astral power. She would have been the next queen.”

“...Is she that amazing?”

“Yes. As princesses, Alice and I will never reach her level. Even the Zoa and Hydra would have surrendered with their tails between their legs.”

Heaven had bequeathed her two gifts: exceptional looks and intellect.

But the planet had robbed her of an astral gift; for the power that dwelled in her was too weak for her to become the queen.

“You must know as an Imperial soldier that the first condition to become queen is to be a formidable astral mage.”

“Actually, I assumed all the Founder’s descendants were great.”

“In that sense, my sister is an exception. But she makes up for it by being frightfully shrewd. I have no idea what she’s scheming...” Sisbell forced herself to stand up with a sigh. “Let’s go, Iska!”

“Hmm? Go where?”

“That should be obvious. If you’re here on vacation, it’s my duty to give you a tour of the place. I’ll show you every nook and cranny—”

The youngest princess pointed beyond the door.

“—and we shall uncover the surveillance cameras and bugs on the royal tour. My sister must be plotting something. First, we shall expose her goal.”

The Lou Erz mansion. Eastern wing. Second floor.

The unfurled carpet was aged but featured an elegant geometric pattern.

Enormous flower vases adorned the corners of the halls like an art gallery.

“I see this place is huge. Do you have enough servants? I haven’t seen anybody since we started walking down the hall,” Jhin mumbled.

“Well, this is a villa, after all.” Sisbell stopped and turned back to face him. “It serves as a place to relax, to take a break from official duties. Since solitude is better for mental fatigue, we keep the number of servants here to a minimum.”

“So you’ve only got those five?”

“Yes. And a few gardeners and chefs. It’s rare to run into someone walking through the mansion.”

It felt strange for an Imperial unit to boldly saunter through such a manor.

“As I’ve explained, I need you to run into the servants on purpose. Distract them,” Sisbell spoke in a hushed voice.

“Are you sure we can go around exploring anywhere we like?” Commander Mismis asked.

“Obviously. You’re on vacation. Naturally, you would explore the place. Just make sure you’re spotted and buy me some time, please,” Sisbell quietly whispered into Mismis’s ear. “Just do everything as planned. Be sure to make your way around the first floor and draw attention to yourselves.”

The operation was now in motion.

Jhin, Nene, and Commander Mismis tiptoed down the stairs. Iska and Sisbell watched them go before making eye contact.

“Let’s go, Iska.”

They were heading to the opposite side of the mansion—to the western wing, which was far from the guest rooms on the east side. There were no special steps to get there, and their intended destination was accessible via the central hall.

...We’re on the lookout for surveillance cameras and listening devices.

...I need to discreetly check for bugs as Sisbell pretends to give me a tour.

From the edges of the hallway to behind the flower vases...

Sisbell had surmised Elletear had set something up.

“My room is in the western wing. I will show you at night.”

“You make it sound so weird...”

“And you’re just imagining things. Make sure you’re on the lookout as planned. I’m sure you’ve trained for this as an Imperial soldier.”

“You make it sound so easy...”

He looked down the passageway. Iska gave a cursory check of this corridor and failed to find anything, but he couldn’t exactly declare the place was bug-free.

...It’ll be tough if their listening devices or cameras are different from Imperial ones.

...Even I might miss those.

“Well, this is hard. I guess I’ll start with the most suspicious places.”

He knocked on the hallway walls once before walking forward a few more steps and repeating the process.

“What are you doing?”

“You can tell if the wall is hollow from the sound.”

Listening devices could be installed in gouged walls or concealed in holes in thin walls. An intelligence unit from the Imperial forces could set one up in an afternoon.

“Another spot is under the carpet. A bug that’s just a fraction of an inch won’t stand out.”

“...Are you confident you could find them?”

“If I see them or step on them. It takes focus, though, which is tiring.”

“That is amazing!” Sisbell took his left hand in hers as though she had been waiting for the moment to strike. Her soft fingers tangled into Iska’s hand, fastening them to his. “I knew my subordinates could do it! I’m counting on you!”

“Like I said, let me concentrate! Also, I’m just a guard...”

That said, he couldn’t find anything.

Based on the automatic door, Iska had assumed the interior had been configured with mechanical mysteries, but he kept coming up empty.

...I guess she might have bugged the rooms?

...There weren’t any in my room. Or in Jhin’s, Nene’s, or Commander Mismis’s.

“It’s impractical to try to search this entire mansion. We’ll reduce the area we cover and limit our important conversations to there.”

“In that case...” Sisbell folded her arms, looking into space as she mulled it over. “There is something I’d like to check. Do you think something might be set up and embedded in the room *next* to mine?”

“You mean to eavesdrop? Yeah, that’s possible.”

Luckily, the members of Unit 907 had been housed next to one another.

Iska’s room was next to Jhin’s, and Jhin had already done a thorough sweep of his room. In which case, the only one left would be...

“The two rooms next to mine are questionable. To the third floor!” Sisbell ran up the stairs.

He could tell at a single glance that the rooms were different from the guest rooms. After all, a huge portrait of Sisbell decorated one of the doors.

“I can tell this is your room,” he said sarcastically.

“This oil painting is a self-portrait. I painted it two years ago.”

“No way!”

“What do you mean?”

“What...? I totally thought you commissioned an artist.”

Iska knew some things about art. Even he had mistaken her use of light and color for the touch of a professional.

“If you painted this two years ago, I think you’re crazy talented.”

“_____” The princess tugged on Iska’s sleeve with an expression that

implied something. They went to a room a few yards away from Sisbell's. She pointed at a portrait hung on that door.

"This is Elletear's self-portrait."

"Huh? Are you sure that's not a photo...?"

How old was she in the painting? Fourteen? Thirteen? Elletear certainly looked younger than Sisbell was now.

It was a hyperrealistic portrait down to her every hair, even on her arms. Had this portrait really been created by a person? He would have had an easier time believing it if someone had told him that a high-resolution image had been pasted onto the canvas.

...It's incredible.

...Just how much concentration and skill did this take?

Elletear Lou Nebulis IX.

This was the crystallized embodiment of the eldest princess's genius, the one born with it all...*except astral power.*

"It's locked." Sisbell attempted to gently push on the door to Elletear's room, but it did not show any sign of budging. "But this is pretty far from my own room. The problem is Alice's."

"Alice's room is here, too?" Iska asked reflexively, but it made sense. This place was owned by the queen's family. Naturally, Alice would have her own room.

"It's to the right of my own room."

They backtracked down the hall.

A portrait hung on the door. Iska looked up at it, blinking in surprise.

"...Uh."

"This is my sister's self-portrait, painted two years ago."

"Remind me... Did Alice always have three eyes?"

"No. I think I remember her disliking the first eye she painted, so she added

another one.”

Iska was looking up at the portrait, which didn’t depict a sweet blonde but... something inhuman that even a two-year-old could draw.

“There’s like ten arms there.”

“Those are locks of hair.”

“And why does her mouth open up to her ears...?”

“She wanted to add lipstick and overdid it.”

“...An appreciator of surrealism, I see. She’s trying not to express her outward appearance but to break free from ideals within her mind to—”

“It’s nothing that difficult. She’s just a terrible painter.” Sisbell laughed. “My sister loves the arts, but she has no talent for them herself. She’s what you would call a connoisseur. She has a sensitive palate but can’t cook for her life.”

“When you put it that way...”

“We should look inside her room. She’s even left it open so generously.” Sisbell beckoned him in.

She had already opened the door and slipped inside.

“Uh, um. Should I go inside Alice’s room...?”

“Why of course. Otherwise, you won’t be able to search for bugs...” The strawberry blonde stared up at him, blocking the doorway. “Or do you actually have a relationship with my sister that is not strictly superficial...?”

“Nope! You’re wrong! There’s nothing between us! We met for the first time in Alsamira!”

“...I figured. You’re a former Saint Disciple from the Empire, and my sister is the sovereign princess. There is no way that adversaries would be working with each other.”

“T-totally.”

“In that case, there should be no issue. Look, Iska, over here.” She yanked him inside.

He'd been wondering what extravagances awaited them, but he realized it wasn't all that different from the guest rooms. The main difference was that the table and sofa were in a more childish colorway, but the sitting room was on the frugal side.

"I haven't gone into a lot of girls' rooms. I don't really feel comfortable..."

"Which girls' rooms have you entered?"

"Nene's and Commander Mismis's. It's tradition to help them with end-of-the-year cleaning. I don't think this room would need much of that..."

The bookshelves, table, and sofa were all ordinary furnishings. It looked like searching for bugs would be easy.

"To eavesdrop on your room, I guess the devices would be installed along the living room wall."

If the goal was to listen in on the sounds of the adjoining room, that would naturally limit the potential locations of such a device.

"Hmm... As for the wall and ceiling... Sisbell, what's on the other side of the clock? Maybe there's a weird mechanism affixed to it."

"I see no sign of one."

"And I don't see anything out of place around the window or the curtains, either... Maybe we were wrong."

"No, I'm sure of it. I have a hunch!" Sisbell called out as she turned over the carpet. "Elletear brought us here. She must be scheming something. We need to check for bugs!"

"But we haven't found any so far..."

"We haven't searched everything. For example, here!"

She headed to the opposite side, running toward Alice's bedroom.

"Iska, over here!"

"But that's her bedroom!"

"We need to investigate. Even her bathroom. If I were planting something, I would absolutely hide something in this room!"

Sisbell jumped onto her older sister's bed. She overturned the beautifully made bed, tossing away pillows and sheets. Her eyes zeroed in on the closet in the corner of the room.

"This must be it. There is no doubt about it. That is what my instincts are telling me."

"...A-are you sure?"

"Just watch. I'm sure we will make an astonishing discovery."

She threw open the closet and blinked at the contents.

"Wh-what do we have here?! I cannot believe she would be hiding these...!"

"What's wrong, Sisbell?!"

"It seems I've opened Pandora's box. Look at this."

Sisbell turned to him, holding a black...string?

No, this was no ordinary string. It was a thin fabric...

"M-my word...! I've never seen underwear made from such delicate material in my life."

"What did you just find?!"

"Eureka!" The youngest princess hoisted the underwear up high in both her hands.

If this was in her older sister's closet, it had to belong to Alice.

...To think Alice was wearing those.

...Wait! What am I imagining?!

Iska violently shook his head from side to side as though he were trying to dispel his own thoughts.

Sisbell continued her excavation. "They're like thin cords made from slightly stretchy material. The fabric feels luxe. Iska, what do you make of these?!"

"Ahhh?! Don't bring those near me! Why do you have to show me?!"

"I-I wonder if this is what the world refers to as a step into adulthood..."
Sisbell gasped, eyes glued onto these very adult things. "H-how indecent. I

cannot believe my own sister would sneak around hiding such things. This is alarming! I must continue the investigation!”

“What about the bugs?!”

“This is a family emergency! ...Hmm? What are these?!” Sisbell pulled out another scrap of fabric from the back of the closet, this time a pearly color.

Even Iska knew what it was—an undergarment for busts. The issue was the texture of the material and the translucent lace that was see-through enough to show Sisbell’s fingers behind it.

For whatever reason, she brought that thing up to her own chest.

“...Ugh. I expected it from Elletear, but to think that Alice has matured so much... Not that I care. I’m still growing!”

She was clearly measuring *something*, ruefully biting her lip.

“A-anyway, these are very suspicious, indeed! ...I sniff a plot! What is my sister up to?”

“What exactly are you sniffing?!”

“Iska, please secure these as evidence. I must resume my search!”

“I really wish you would stop handing these over to me!”

He timidly caught in midair the two undergarments that had been thrown to him.

When he felt the fabric, featherlight and soft in his hands, Iska squeezed his eyes shut so he wouldn’t catch the faintest sight of them up close.

...Focus, dude! Focus! Wait! Do the opposite of focusing!

...I can’t keep holding on to these. I’ve got to put them somewhere else.

“I’ll take those from you.”

“Thank heavens! Take them!”

“...You were really gripping onto my underwear... Did these really feel that good?”

“N-no! They’re made from such soft material, I was trying *not* to crumple

them—,” Iska explained, then suddenly snapped to his senses.

Wait? Who had he been talking to until just now?

It was a gentle and sweet voice. Something counterpoised and resounding with force.

“...” He slowly cracked open his eyes.

There he found...a blond girl, brows furrowed and shoulders quivering. She hid the underwear behind her back, face flushing red as though she was embarrassed.

“Wait! *Alice?!!*”

“What do you think you’re doing in my rooooooom?!” she shrieked.

The windows rattled. Sisbell turned around, registering her sister’s voice, ghost pale.

“S-Sister?!!”

“Sisbeeeeeeeell!”

“Ahhhhhhhhh?!!”

With a look in her eyes that she would seldom even show to enemies, the middle daughter pounced on the youngest sibling. She chased her escaping prey to the back of the bed.

She was as quick as a cat going after a mouse.

“...You saw something, didn’t you?”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh?! S-stop! Anything but the ice...! I-I know! Iska ordered me to do this!”

“Liar!”

With her back turned to Iska, Alice loomed over Sisbell.

He didn’t even want to imagine the look on her face. In fact, he was ready to book it out of there.

“Sisbell.”

“Y-yes, sister?!!” She looked up in tears at Alice.

“You saw nothing. You didn’t see a glimpse into the adult world that I dabbled in out of pure curiosity. Do you understand me? The only things in here were decent articles of clothing.”

“...Uh...ahhh...”

“I can’t hear you.”

“Fiiiineeee!”

“And, Iska, that goes for you, too! You speak about this to no one!”

“R-roger...!”

“All right. Let’s just say there were no witnesses.” Alice wiped the sweat off her brow.

Rin stumbled into the room, hauling suitcases.

“Lady Alice, I asked you to not hurry off without me... It’s hard enough catching up to you. Hmm? The Imperial swordsman!”

“Don’t worry about him. We must find my older sister. She must be somewhere in this mansion.” Alice took a deep breath to calm down...and immediately looked down at her younger sister. “Sisbell, we’re returning to the palace. The queen is worried, and there is important work waiting for you.”

“...”

“Sisbell?”

“...I can’t,” she managed, sounding strained as if her mouth were full of blood. “I used an Imperial troop as my guards. I don’t think I made a mistake with that choice. Vichyssoise was after my life... And I had to fight fire with fire.”

“I know. I also know what happened after,” Alice answered, looking serious. “Rin saw Elletear use that information against you to take you to the villa, and the queen has been informed of this matter. That is why I have two roles: protecting you and bringing our sister back to the palace.”

“...”

“We shall have our sister return to the palace immediately. Then you will be under my protection.”

“—Oh, that will be a problem.”

Kchak. The doorknob rattled, and another figure entered Alice’s room.

“It seems I’ve intruded on something.” The eldest princess smiled kindly upon them.

After looking at Alice, Sisbell, Rin, then Iska in turn, the emerald-haired beauty blushed. “Three girls and a boy gathering in a room? How romantic.”

“Please don’t dodge the issue.” Alice turned around and glared at her older sister, who was fanning her cheek.

This sounded almost like an interrogation.

“Return to the palace immediately. Those were the queen’s royal orders.”

“Oh? Aren’t you going to ask why I brought our sister here?”

“You can explain everything the queen. That has nothing to do with me.” Alice wouldn’t put up with idle chitchat. She took a step forward. “Let’s go home!”

“All right.”

“I knew you wouldn’t cooperate! In that case, I think that... Huh?”

“All right. Let’s go home, Alice.”

“Uh...um?” Alice blinked at her blankly.

Alice had squared her shoulders, ready to close in on her sister, but Elletear was so obedient that she was thrown for a loop.

“On one condition...” Elletear wagged a finger in front of Alice’s nose. “We’ll return tomorrow. Dinner is underway, and the chefs have already purchased ingredients for breakfast. The servants have even gone to all the trouble of making the beds. We can’t just let that go to waste.”

“...Tomorrow?”

“Yes. I pledge that on my dignity. Tomorrow morning, I shall go back to the palace. Isn’t that what you want?”

Alice scowled, thinking to herself. In place of her lady, Rin gave a small bow.

“If I may be so forward, Lady Elletear...”

“What is it?”

“We have not discussed Lady Sisbell yet. When you make your way home, will Lady Sisbell join you?”

“That wasn’t part of the agreement.” The eldest daughter firmly shook her head. “Sisbell made a promise to me... Right, Sisbell?”

“...Yes.”

Elletear was not budging on this matter.

Ten days.

If Sisbell attempted to return to the palace before then, Elletear would expose her secret.

...But I don't get it.

...Why would the eldest princess want to lock her sister up in this villa?

Iska and Sisbell hadn’t been able to turn up any listening devices or surveillance cameras. There had to be a reason why Elletear would fixate on keeping her in this specific place. All Iska could think was that she would send another assassin like Vichyssoise.

...Well, that seems less likely now that Alice is here.

...Any assassin that tries to fight Alice will be given a taste of their own medicine.

That was why this situation felt so strange to him.

What was the eldest princess planning by leaving Sisbell here?

“Alice, please send word to the palace. I will return to the palace tomorrow, and you can stay by Sisbell’s side.”

“...Understood. Rin, my communications device.” Alice took it from her attendant.

“Also, Alice, once you’re finished informing the queen, come to the reception room.”

“? I think it’s too early for dinner.”

“Not for dinner. If you’re staying the night, we need to do something before then.”

Elletear winked playfully at her.

“We haven’t all introduced each other, now have we?”

3

The Lou Erz mansion. Sunset Chamber, the reception room.

Unit 907 had been called to the banquet hall. Elletear was the one to greet them. The sudden intruder—Alice—was in the room, too.

“Let me introduce you. This is my younger sister Aliceliese. You may call her Alice.”

“I...I am the middle sister, Aliceliese. *Nice to meet you...*”

What a stiff greeting.

As expected. After all, she was talking to Iska and Commander Mismis, who were acquainted with Alice.

“Alice works as a manager for famous idols in the neutral cities. She is pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“...What? I’ve never worked as a manager!”

“But that’s an assumed appearance. On her days off, she transforms into a mysterious model with a hundred thousand fans.”

“What?!” Alice tried to stop her sister.

From a third-party perspective, it looked like an inside joke between siblings, but it wasn’t clear whether that was Elletear’s true intention.

Iska’s concern was how his unit would react.

...I think Jhin is meeting Alice for the first time.

...Nene seems like she’s lost, but I don’t think she’s ever seen Alice’s face.

Then there was Commander Mismis. Never in her dreams had she expected

to reunite with the Ice Calamity Witch—the greatest threat to the Imperial forces.

And sure enough...

“Huh? I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere... Aaaaaah!” Commander Mismis shrieked, pointing her finger at Alice in front of the servants. “Y-you’re the Ice Ca—”

“Oh, pardon me.”

“Yip?!”

With a blow from behind delivered by Rin, Commander Mismis crumpled to the ground.

“I think our guest is tired. Yumilecia, Nami, please take her to her room.”

“...Uh...uhhhh.” Commander Mismis was hauled away.

You owe me one, Imperial swordsman, for my quick reflexes. Rin stared at him.

Ice Calamity Witch was an offensive moniker circulated in the Empire. If Mismis had blurted that out in the villa, things would have gotten ugly. Even if Alice had let it slide, the servants and the chef would have flown off the handle at the mere mention of that name.

“Hey, Iska, did you catch what the boss said?” Jhin whispered.

“...Not really. I don’t think it’s a big deal.” Iska feigned ignorance, gazing at someone in his periphery.

“This is so fun. I’m so excited.”

...Elletear was clapping her hands together in satisfaction.

“It tickles me pink to have all three sisters sleeping under one roof.”

4

The white steam filling the bathroom smelled faintly of soap.

The tub, which was overflowing with cloudy water, could accommodate over

ten people with their legs stretched. Flower blossoms and herbs floated on the surface, freshly plucked from the garden. Their floral scent mixed perfectly with the bath salts, creating the most serene mood.

...Or so it should have.

A commotion was coming from the changing room next to the bath.

“Are you trying to kidnap me?! H-help! Iska! Jhin!”

“It’s no use. This is the women’s bath. They wouldn’t come here even by mistake.”

“Um... Help! Nene!”

“Your little minion stuffed herself to sleep.”

“Neneeeeeeeeeee?! ”

Mismis had been dragged into the changing room. Sisbell and Rin had surrounded her.

“What are you planning to do to me?! ”

“Keep your voice down. Don’t make a scene. Do what we say, and we won’t hurt you.” Rin had a firm grip on Mismis’s shoulder, refusing to let go.

“Wh-what do you want?”

“Simple. You know Alice is a princess. You cannot tell your subordinates. Or any other Imperial-force members, obviously.”

“...You mean Jhin and Nene?”

“That’s right. We do not want her identity to be known to the Imperial forces.”

The Ice Calamity Witch was a mysterious figure who kept her face hidden behind a veil on the battlefield. The Imperial forces knew she was blond, but none of them knew the details of her face or that she was the daughter of the queen.

“You and Iska are the only ones who know. We cannot have more people figuring this out.”

“Wh-what will you do to Iska...?”

“The same goes for that swordsman, but you seemed more likely to slip up. We are taking preventative measures. Are you satisfied, Lady Sisbell?”

“Yes. Do you understand us, Commander?” Sisbell crossed her arms. “I imagine you can piece together that you need to keep silent that I’m a princess, too. If you say anything, I will know immediately. With my astral power, there is nothing you can hide from me.”

“...Wait. What?”



“You still have something to say? You already know about my ability.”

“Th-that’s not what I meant!” Mismis protested as Rin kept a hold of her. She gave Sisbell a once-over. “Uh...um.”

“What is it?”

“...By *princess*, do you mean you’re a princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty?”

“You’re asking that now? You had to have realized that immediately.”

Brushing aside her strawberry-blond hair, Sisbell let out a heavy sigh.

“Alice is the Nebulis Sovereignty’s middle princess—a purebred feared by the Imperial forces as the Ice Calamity Witch. Have you been listening to me call her ‘Sister’? I’m obviously the younger one. That means I’m the youngest princess —”

“There’s no way!”

“...I thought anyone would come to that conclusion, but it seems I was mistaken.”

“Then that pretty lady—Elletear...she’s the eldest princess?!”

“Took you long enough!” howled Sisbell.

Rin sighed from beside them. She couldn’t believe Mismis could be so dense.

“A-anyway, do you understand me?! My position is to remain a secret!”

“Y-yesss, ma’am!”

In the steamy bathroom, Mismis and the youngest princess had made a pact between women.

The dark cosmic canvas was devoid of any clouds.

The stars seemed to twinkle as if whispering to him. Was it because they were in the heart of mage nation?

...I’ve seen night skies in the Imperial capital millions of times.

...The one in Alsamira’s desert was beautiful, too.

But he’d never felt so close to the sky before, looking up at the stars from the

third floor of this villa. It was so close, it seemed almost as though astral power was winking at him in the sky.

“I’ll be okay. You should stay with Sisbell. Make sure to go to the baths with her. Her safety is our top priority.”

Behind him as he placed his hand against the windowpane, the middle princess cradled her communications device in her room. She exhaled as she sat down on the sofa.

“Rin will stay with Sisbell while she takes a bath.”

“...So you *are* worried about your little sister. No one knows what could happen in this villa, I guess.”

“Things *are* already happening.”

Iska watched as Alice’s reflection in the window sunk into the sofa and looked up at him.

“There are four Imperial soldiers in my vacation home. Not as prisoners but as guests. If this isn’t a problem, then what is?”

“Tell that to your older sister.”

“Urk! I-I suppose I should! But I wish you would give me some advice!”

“...Advice, huh?”

She could have just said that from the start. He grumbled inaudibly before turning to her.

When they were alone, he almost forgot about his circumstances, but he was in the heart of an enemy nation. His unit in total isolation. Even their weapons had been confiscated.

“I’m an Imperial soldier, so it’s hard for me to offer my input.”

“Then you can just listen... I’m having a hard time understanding this. Why would Elletear bring my younger sister here?” The blond girl gently turned down her long eyelashes. “I mean, right? Ten days at this villa? What difference will that make? It doesn’t benefit anyone. It just makes my older sister seem suspicious. To be honest, the queen already suspects her. This is just driving a

wedge between my family members.”

“_____”

“I can’t wrap my head around it. I just want this to be over with. If things remain so uncertain, I won’t be able to settle things with you...”

She looked at him with upturned eyes, doe-like pupils fixed on him.

They needed to resolve things on the battlefield. All they had done was proclaim each other as enemies.

So why did her eyes seem so passionate and lovely?

“My sister will return to the palace tomorrow morning, but Sisbell will remain here for ten days. She’s being blackmailed to stay, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

“I will remain in the villa as well. Officially, I will do it to protect my sister, but I have another reason. I feel like I can tell you.”

“To keep an eye on us, right? I know.”

There were no astral mages guarding this vacation home. Alice was staying to deter the Imperial soldiers from causing problems there.

“Just so we’re clear, we’re not planning to try anything in enemy territory.”

“Obviously. If you caused a disturbance here, even I wouldn’t forgive you. I wouldn’t be able to, as a princess.”

Alice got up from the sofa, moving to the window. She was standing right next to Iska.

“Promise me this. You will never cause any problems in *my country*, and you will not try to escape from the mansion. I do not wish to have another meaningless battle with you.”

“...”

“Problem?”

“Not exactly.”

Alice had called Nebulis “her” country. For some reason, he was hung up on

her word choice, but she seemed normal, so maybe she had done it unconsciously?

“Alice, did you just—?”

“Lady Alice.”

There was a knock at the door of the room.

Was that the servant? Alice immediately backed away to distance herself from him.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Is Mr. Iska here? Lady Elletear has asked us to bring him.”

“...She has?” Alice’s whisper couldn’t be heard outside the door. “...How did you know where Iska is?” called out the princess.

“Lady Alice.”

“All right. I will have him head over.” Alice looked at him out of the corner of her eye and silently pointed at the door. “Iska.”

“What?”

“Do not trust my sister. You...are *my* rival.”

That served as the final push to send him away from the room.

The girl in the housekeeping apron gave him a small bow. “Please come this way.”

Elletear’s room was the closest to the front of the hallway. The door adorned with the portrait of the girl with the emerald hair opened.

“Please go in.”

With that, the servant took her leave.

...She only obliged because she was ordered to call me.

...I guess she can’t stand to see my face. She makes it so obvious.

This was only natural.

Alice and Sisbell were just exceptions. This was probably the best that

Imperial soldiers would get.

“...It’s Iska. I think you called me here.”

“Please come in,” trilled someone from the lit living room.

He headed into the space illuminated by the light of the chandelier. The living room was adorned with a carpet reminiscent of a grassy field.

“Welcome.”

In the center of the living room were two sofas facing each other.

The eldest princess of the Nebulis Sovereignty smiled at him...in her bathrobe. Her cleavage—she was more well-endowed than Alice—peeked out of the deep neckline. The hem barely covered her butt, and her pale thighs were bare.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just came out of the bath.”

Beauty personified smiled, enjoying herself, when Iska reflexively turned to look away.

“But I am happy. It seems you even consider a witch a woman... I’m delighted by the fact you’re blushing.”

“...Were you trying to test me?”

“Hmm. Who knows? It is true that I just got out of the bath. Don’t think too deeply about it. I simply like this bathrobe.”

She invited him to sit with her gaze. Iska continued to cast his eyes away to prevent himself from directly looking at Elletear’s breasts or thighs as she sat across from him.

“Hee-hee. Cute.” She seemed to be having fun. “You look at me differently from the people I met in the Imperial capital.”

“In the Imperial capital?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I was a double agent. There was a time when I had ties to the Imperial headquarters.”

“...And you weren’t just taken captive by our troops?”

“I kept my identity secret. If they realized I was a descendant of the Revered

Founder, they never would have let me return to my home country. Now it's just a good memory."

She crossed her legs and placed her hands together on top of her knees. She was barely a yard away from Iska's seat. He could touch her if he reached out.

"Are you trying to see if I'm actually here alone? That there are no guards or attendants here?" She stared straight at him. "You make it so obvious when you stare at me before scouring the room with your eyes."

"...Yeah, to be honest."

"Honesty is a virtue. I will respond in kind by answering you truthfully. There's no one else. Not my guard. And I have no attendants like Rin or Shuvalts, either."

Even though she was part of the royal family? It was hard to believe a princess would have no guard, even if she could do everything herself without the help of an attendant.

...Is she bluffing because I'm an Imperial subject?

...I mean, even Alice has Rin protecting her.

Even the Ice Calamity Witch, who could take down an entire Imperial base on her own, had a guard. With Elletear's astral power, it would seem she would require one. Iska would have been able to crush a witch with no experience in battle with his bare hands.

Then why was she acting so composed?

"If I told you I'm in the same camp as Sisbell, would that explain things?"

"...Which means..."

"I am seeking someone like myself. No one in the Sovereignty will fight for the same goal as me. That's why I invited you here, former Saint Disciple Iska."

"Me?"

She hadn't invited the squadron because they were Sisbell's guards?

"Won't you become my subordinate? That's what I wanted to ask you." Elletear exhaled and stretched.

He could see the outline of her breasts clearly under the bathrobe, but this must all be part of her calculations. She extended her back, groaning sensually in a way that could make anyone fall in love with her.

“What do you think?”

“...I don’t understand. How could there be no one else in the Sovereignty?”

He could understand when it came to Sisbell’s circumstances.

She was searching for the traitors to the current regime. Until then, she wouldn’t let anyone join her team. It made logical sense.

“Formidable astral mages are everywhere. Even I know that,” Iska said. “There has to be someone for the job.”

“I want to crush this very country.”

“...Come again?”

“I want to crush present-day Nebulis into smithereens. I want to overturn it from its roots.”

Her face had grown scarlet...from excitement, and Elletear’s eyes were glazed over as if imagining that future had filled her with rapture.

“Don’t you think this is perfect for you, Imperial soldier? Let’s destroy the Sovereignty together.”

“_____”

He couldn’t form any words. What was this princess saying?

The sweat beading on Iska’s face wasn’t from distress or shock. It was from something that chilled him to his very core.

...Alice and Sisbell think differently, but they’re planning on becoming the queen.

...They’re trying to protect their country out of love.

But Elletear? It seemed it was the opposite for her.

She couldn’t care less about the throne; she was a traitorous witch attempting to bring the nation to ruin.

“But why would you want that?”

“I’ll tell you if you choose to work under me... Oh, I might just melt, imagining what the future holds. I want to break this *horribly drab* country even a day sooner.”

“...But Sisbell is here,” Iska barely managed to blurt out from his dry lips. “She could re-create this conversation just now. If the queen caught wind...”

“Just kidding.”

“Huh?”

“It was a joke. Obviously, the eldest princess would never imagine such things. There is no issue if Sisbell happens to hear.”

Elletear switched her tone. If her voice had just been thorny, it was now as soft as a carnation—lovely from every angle. There was no way to be suspicious of such a voice.

“I called you here out of curiosity. I couldn’t believe a Saint Disciple would break a witch out of prison. I wanted to talk to you, just the two of us.”

“...You did your research.”

“I heard there was an unusual person in the Imperial army. A berserker who hates battle. A soldier who was barely a Saint Disciple and hoped to capture one of the Sovereignty’s purebreds to force peace negotiations.”

“*Who* told you *that?!*” He felt as if he’d been electrocuted, and he jumped to his feet.

...I only told a few people.

...I’ve told Unit 907, and I said something similar when I was promoted to Saint Disciple.

Even within the Imperial headquarters, there were only a handful who really knew what was going on in his mind.

Who had told her? The Saint Disciples? The Eight Great Apostles?

Just who was this princess in contact with in the Empire?

Riiiiiiiiing... The handbell rang from nowhere in particular. It came from the

hallway and spread through the room as if to fill the space.

“It’s eleven. That marks the end of the day. The servants have just finished their work. Now they will each retire and sleep within the hour.”

“ ... ”

“I suppose you understand what I’m trying to say.”

“...That our conversation is over?” He leaned forward, fervor completely dampened.

She must have calculated that timing perfectly.

...Time is up before we can get to my questions.

...How clever does she have to be to pull this off so immaculately?

She had gotten him, he realized. Iska exhaled.

“It saves me the trouble of explaining. Though our conversation for tonight has come to an end, we may speak again if the opportunity presents itself. Next time, I would like to speak to you about the Saint Disciples who work with you.”

“...You think an Imperial subject would leak our top secrets?”

“There are two people who wield swords among the eleven. You, Iska, who used to be in the eleventh seat and Joheim in the first. I know that much.”

Her voice was so lovely. Her fingertips crept along the flushed skin near her chest, which was fascinatingly moist with sweat.

“I wonder who would be stronger: you or Joheim?”

“ ... ”

“I would love to know. Back in the old days, it seems Imperial nobles would have their servant swordsmen fight each other in the arena.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“I specialize in anti–astral mage techniques. I never trained to fight against people. Even if I competed, I would fall behind at the first or second strike, and I’d lose at the third.”

Elletear was silent. She didn't deride or mock him, instead offering the tiniest of smiles. He quietly turned around.

"If you'll excuse me."

"Oh, please wait. Where are you going?"

"Huh?"

"I believe I was clear. It's time to retire to bed. This way."

The eldest princess was on her feet, opening a door at the back of the living room.

The bedroom.

Inside was a bed large enough for several people. The sun-dried sheets were clean with nary a wrinkle.

"My bed is so very big. It may even be too large for two people."

"...Um? I'm not following."

"You're not here as Sisbell's guard, but as my guest. And just as I told you earlier, I do not have anyone to protect me. How can I even sleep at night?"

"...I-I suppose." Iska was backing away as she eyed him suggestively.

Even though she looked stunning, he found himself imagining a predator pinning its prey with its gaze.

"That is why I would be so happy if you snuggled with me."

"What now?!" barked Iska involuntarily.

He didn't even completely get it, but alarm bells were blaring in his head, telling him that obliging her request would be unforgivable.

"That's impossible! I mean, I'm in the Imperial army!"

"Hee-hee. You're even cute when you're surprised. I'm starting to see how witnessing a gentleman as strong as a Saint Disciple lose his composure can be fun."

Iska glued himself to the corner of the room. Elletear stepped toward him.

Her slender fingers reached out to his cheek.

“Now, Iska—”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” someone snapped.

“Hmm? Sisbell?”

“*Huff, huff...* I just barely made it. I couldn’t find any sign of Iska, so I used my astral power to locate him... You have nothing to worry about now, Iska.”

The youngest sister had kicked open the door, holding what looked like a master key. She must have been ready for bed, because she was in an adorable light-pink nightgown.

“...You’ve really done it this time,” she snarled.

“Oh? What ever could you mean?”

“Cover yourself first! I’m sure your closet is packed with clothes!”

“Must I? But it’s sweltering, and I feel so feverish.”

“Chop-chop!”

“...Fine. As long as you stop glaring at me.”

Elletear reluctantly started to change in the adjoining room. Sisbell did not stop her interrogation.

“I know your ulterior motives. You’re trying to make a move on *my* Iska to destabilize me.”

“Oh, it seems you’ve misunderstood two things.” Elletear emerged, dressed in nightclothes.

Unlike Sisbell’s nightgown, her clothes were more sensual, emphasizing all her feminine curves.

“I never intended to deceive my adorable little sister.”

“...And what’s the other misunderstanding?”

“Listen, Sisbell. He’s my guest now. In other words, Iska is as good as mine.”

“I won’t let that pass! Iska is my guard! In other words—”

Sisbell was howling again, never peeling her eyes off her older sister as she pointed at Iska behind her.

“I have the right to cuddle with Iska!”

“Since when?!” Iska exclaimed.

“Do you get it, Sister? Then I will take Iska to my room.”

“You’re so silly, Sisbell. He will sleep with me.”

“Wait. Do I get a say on the matter? I think you should ask for my opinion!”

They weren’t listening to Iska. Well, it was more like they hadn’t heard him.

The princesses had already dismissed the Imperial swordsman, glowering at each other.

The youngest sister, Sisbell, was baring her cute canines.

The eldest sister, Elletear, was looking down at her with a dauntless smile.

“Hah... I’m surprised you’re talking back to me. I suppose it is my role as your sister to praise you for growing up.”

“Sister?”

“But, Sisbell, you’re severely lacking something.”

Elletear went on the move, slipping past her younger sister and heading right to Iska.

“Iska.” With dewy eyes, she squeezed his hand in hers. “Would you hear me out?”

“Y-you’ve still got more to say...?”

“I’m so nervous about spending a night in the mansion without a single guard... Can you hear it? My heart is pounding.”

She yanked on his hand.

He had no time to realize what was going on as Elletear pressed it against her chest.

“See? It’s beating so fast. Feel how nervous I am.”

“Wh-what are you—?!”

It was as if he was touching the finest grade of cotton. Her breasts were

weighty, though, and he could feel her body heat. He was at a loss for words, and his brain still hadn't processed all of this. His mind went blank.

"Uh...um, uhhh..."

"What do you think? Can you feel my heart pounding?"

"As iiiiiiiiiiiif!" Sisbell body-slammed her and pried Iska's hand free. "Wh-what do you mean I'm lacking in something?! I'm a growing girl. Yours are just...larger than life!"

"Take a look, Sisbell. This is called a royal embrace."

"Y-you call that a royal embrace?!"

"Plus, it shows I'm placing my body in his trust."

"...Guh. B-but you can't do this! I won't hand Iska over to you!"

Sisbell yanked on his other hand.

He was being pulled by the witch sisters on both sides.

"Hold it right there!"

The missing piece.

The middle sister's shout pealed through the living room.

"I thought I heard a commotion... Wh-wh-what do you think you're doing...? What are you doing capturing Iska?!"

"Sister?!" The youngest sister bolted upright.

"You left the door open, Sisbell," Elletear said. "She must have heard our voices in the hallway."

Elletear didn't even flinch, seeming pleased by this turn of events.

Glaring at her sisters, Alice marched to them, taking long strides. She must have been ready to go to bed, too, because she had draped some clothes over her shoulders to hide her nightgown.

"Sisbell, explain yourself."

"Guh...I suppose you've caught me red-handed. But we don't need your intervention!"

The youngest witch refused to let go of Iska's hand.

"I heard you have no relationship with this Imperial soldier. In that case, you have no right to say anything about my treatment of him."

"...Uh?" Alice inhaled sharply when her sister poked her sore spot. "Regardless, he is still an Imperial soldier. Since he is an enemy of the Sovereignty, I have the right to question your behavior, Sisbell. The same goes for you, Elletear."

"We're planning to cuddle for the night."

"We're going to snuggle."

"...You're sleeping together?" Alice blinked back blankly.

This was all so alarming, common sense seemed to fly out the window.

"Y-you're cuddling?! Wh-wh-wh-what do you think you two are saying?!"

"I am entirely serious." Sisbell wouldn't let go of Iska's hand. "I can't fathom spending a night without my attendant. Iska volunteered to sleep with me. As I'd expect of my servant!"

"Like I said, I'm not your servant!"

"Oh, Sisbell. There seems to be a grave misunderstanding." Elletear held onto his other hand.

Even if Iska wanted to shake Elletear off or pull his hand away in protest, he was dangerously close to brushing up against her breasts again, so he couldn't move carelessly.

"I was the one who invited Iska to the mansion. In that case, you should assume Iska is mine during this visit."

"No! Iska is working for me!"

"As I said, stop right there!" Alice stepped into the fight. "Please get a hold of yourself. I won't give Iska to anyone!"

"Hmm? I thought this was your first time meeting him, Alice. And he is an Imperial soldier. He should be one of your despicable enemies on the battlefield," Elletear noted.

“Uh...ugh...uhhh?!” Alice gritted her teeth. She was glaring at the ceiling, desperately hoping to come up with a good excuse.

“I-I know!”

Her face lit up.

“Because he is an Imperial soldier, I cannot allow my sisters to be with such a dangerous individual. According to the rumors, their men become carnal beasts at night!”

“That’s slander!”

“Quiet, you! ...S-so that’s why I’m here! To protect my sisters from this savage!”

“A beast, huh? He doesn’t strike me as one.” Elletear looked between Iska and Alice, then cocked her head to the side. “If that’s the case, Alice, do you have any bright ideas for us?”

“I-I will stay the night, too!” Alice planted her hand on her chest. “I will cuddle—I mean, I’ll sleep here to keep an eye on the Imperial soldier if you two are spending the night with him.”

“...Uh, so, personally, I’d like to sleep in my own room by myself,” Iska mumbled.

“So the four of us will sleep together? Hmm, my bed can accommodate us, so I suppose that would be fine. What do you think, Sisbell?”

“I have no qualms.”

“But what about what I think?! C’mon, guys!” Iska’s desperate pleas went unheard.

The three sister witches were apparently already in a battle in a higher dimension than what Iska could fathom or see.

“The issue is our positions in the bed.” Sisbell crossed her arms, looking entirely serious. “I have an idea. We can order ourselves from oldest to youngest, with Elletear, Alice, and then me. Iska can be at the left end. How’s that?”

“Oh my, Sisbell. In other words, you want to keep him all to yourself? That seems unfair. What do you say, Alice?”

“I-I don’t particularly care whether I’m next to Iska...b-but I see. If that is a matter of debate, then why don’t we draw straws for it?”

Alice took notepad paper from the top of the table, tearing it into three strips that she labeled “left,” “middle,” and “right.”

“Iska will be on the left side of the bed. Now we simply need to decide our positions. If you draw ‘left,’ you get to sleep next to him. Is that all right?”

“M-me first!” Sisbell drew an option before the others. “Th-the middle... In other words, I won’t be next to Iska, *and* I will have to be squished between both of you...”

“Oh my. I am on the right, so I suppose I’m at the very end of the bed. Well, that means...”

“Y-yes! I win! I’m next to Iska!” Alice jumped up and down as she clutched the final paper in her hand. “The last one gets the luck of the draw. I get to sleep with him and—”

“Alice?”

“Gah?!” The middle child came back to her senses.

“You seem suspiciously happy...”

“A-ahem. What could you possibly mean, Sisbell? I will sleep next to the Imperial soldier to protect you both. There is no more ideal position for me to sleep in.”

“Then why do you sound so *jubilant* about it?”

“I-I most certainly do not! Obviously I detest the fact that I will have to sleep next to an Imperial soldier!” Alice sighed in relief. “And you, Imperial soldier! Th-this is an exception. Snuggle with me... Er, I meant to say I grant you special permission to sleep beside me!”

“Like I said, I’d rather stay in my room...”

“Your. Answer?”

“...Fine.”

He was dragged along as they escorted him to the bedroom.

A sweet smell tickled his nose. There was white smoke wafting from a transparent container set up in a corner of the room—maybe some plant-derived essential oils.

...I'm in a girl's bedroom.

...I've only been in one other—Alice's. Isn't this my second time?

Iska had peeked into Commander Mismis's and Nene's rooms in the women's dorms, but he hadn't exactly crossed the threshold. He hadn't had a clue this trial would be waiting for him.

“Hee-hee. I wonder how long it's been since all three sisters slept together. This should be fun.”

“...Fine. I give up on sleeping with Iska, but I can rest easy in the same room as him.”

The oldest sister reclined on the right side of the bed. Next to her, Sisbell cautiously came to lie facedown.

“Alice, come to bed. Don't stand there like a board. What's gotten into you? Why is your face all red?” Elletear asked.

“Iska, what's up with you? Even you're blushing.”

“...”

Iska and Alice had frozen up at the corner of the bed, facing each other.

“After you, Alice.”

“Y-you first. I'll get in last...!”

“But I'm supposed to be at the end.”

“You're the guest! You first! ...Fine. Let's get into the bed at the same time.”

Elletear, Sisbell, Alice, and Iska were lined up in the bed. A single top sheet covered all four of them. They were much too close to each other.

In fact, Iska could hear the three sisters breathing in his ears as soon as the

light went off.

...How can I get a wink of sleep here?!

...Ah well, I was planning on keeping watch anyway.

That was his duty as Sisbell's guard. He had been planning to borrow her communications device so he could return to his room and be on standby in case she requested assistance.

Since they were staying in the same room for the night, he was more worried about...

Just as Iska opened his eyes, he found something right under his nose.

"Alice?!"

"...Shh. Quiet. The other two will hear us."

Sleeping on her side, Alice had her eyes open, staring at him. Their faces were hardly seven inches apart. Even with the lights off, Iska could make out the details of her face.

"Th-they're already asleep...so if we don't keep quiet, we'll wake them up..."

Alice talked to him in a soft whisper. The gentle breathing from behind her was coming from either Elletear or Sisbell. Only Iska and Alice were awake.

"Iska. Um... As you know, I have to consider my position as a princess. Our skin cannot touch. You must be careful."

"I mean, I wasn't planning on doing anything weird."

"But if you—"

She gazed at him from up close. He was sure her face was red from nerves. There was no other reason for her to be blushing.

"If you were to fling your arms around me in your sleep, I suppose I wouldn't do anything about it. I would have to overlook it if you did that unconsciously..."

"It sounds like you're already loosening the rules!" Iska whispered loudly.

"I-I am just clarifying for good measure! It's not as if I want it to happen. Don't take my words out of context!"

“Oh, Iska!”

Alice shivered when Elletear spoke up.

“A-are you awake?” Alice asked.

“...”

“...Hello?”

Alice received no reply. She was just about to turn around to check behind her.

“Oh, Iska, not in front of others! You’re so bold.”

The eldest daughter seemed to be talking in her sleep. This piqued their interest.

“Hee-hee. I have an idea,” Elletear murmured.

“...Aaah? Wh-what do you think you’re doing, Iska? You can’t just take me into your arms. That is much too soon for us,” mumbled Sisbell, feigning innocence.

It seemed Sisbell was talking in her sleep, too.

“Gotcha! Oh my, you’re much softer than I imagined, Iska.”

“I-Iska...mm...please. Where do you think you’re grabbing? Oh, that tickles. I... can’t believe you’re so bold.”

“Hee-hee. Cute voice.”

What were they even doing over there? More importantly, what were they even dreaming about?

The two sisters behind Alice seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“Ah!”

“Oof.”

Alice flung her arms around Iska.

Sisbell had kicked Alice in her sleep, pushing her up against Iska like a domino.

“I-I’m sorry...”

“I’m fine, but, Alice, uh...could you give me some room...?”

“Sisbell keeps kicking me, so I can’t go back to my original spot.”

“Just how much does she toss and turn in her sleep?!”

If he were pushed farther, he’d end up falling off the bed. All Iska could do was tolerate her presence.

...It’s so dark, and she’s so close. I can hear Alice’s breathing.

...Wait. Does that mean she can hear me?

They were on their sides, facing each other.

Even though Iska was slightly taller when they were standing, their eyes were level now, since their heads were propped up on pillows.

Alice’s hand reached out to touch Iska’s chest. Not just gently with her fingertips. She pressed her entire hand against him.



“...Wow. You might look thin, but you’ve got some muscle.”

“Where are you touching?!”

“I-it’s not what it seems like. My sister is kicking me from behind, so I keep being pushed forward!”

She made no attempt to retract her hand.

“Boys run warm. I feel as if I might scald myself on you...”

“You just said our skin isn’t supposed to touch.”

“Th-this was just inevitable! And you’re wearing clothes, so it’s not a problem.”

“Is that *really* the issue?”

“...A-all right. Then...then...”

In the darkness, he could make out Alice nodding to herself. Her small lips were moving ever so slightly as the witch princess whispered to him.

“D-do you want...to touch me, too...?”

“...Pardon?”

“We’re rivals, right? I’ve touched you, so it’s not fair unless you touch me there, too.”

Alice was touching him on his chest, which meant...

“_____”

Almost unconsciously, Iska ended up looking down. He could catch a glimpse of her delicate collarbone above the neckline of her nightgown. The mound under her clothes bobbed up and down with each breath. Alice had more than enough of what Elletear had called a “royal embrace.”

“Oh, stop... Don’t look so close... This is so embarrassing...” Alice’s face was turning red.

It didn’t seem like he was imagining that she was starting to pant.

“H-hurry up... If you say you want to touch them...then I’ll put up with it...”

“You’re making me seem like I’m a pervert!”

“I-I mean, those are our rules. I want to have a fair battle with you. Ah, but now that I think of it...”

“Now that you think of what?”

“...” Alice stared straight at him.

She seemed completely different from before. She had gone from looking like an embarrassed maiden to seeming as though she were about to seek recourse from him.

“Wh-what is it?”

“...You saw.”

“Saw what?”

“...My underwear. When you were with Sisbell in my room. You were squeezing them in your fists...”

“I-I wasn’t! That was a misunderstanding!”

“We need to be *equal*, right? As rivals.”

A shiver went down his spine.

“That’s right. You got an eyeful of my underwear, so it’s only right to look at yours.”

“There’s definitely something wrong about that!”

“Nothing wrong with equality. As your rival, I think I have a right to know everything about you!”

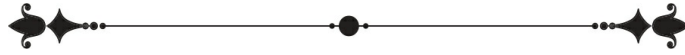
Alice’s hand was gripping the hem of his clothes. She was readying her hand to rip them off.

“Show me your underwear! Then we’ll be even!”

“Even in what?! Wait, Alice! Hey! Agh! Rin! Where’s Rin?! Your lady’s gone mad! Stop her!” shrieked Iska, calling for the absent attendant.

For the rest of the night, Iska was locked in a fierce battle to hold Alice back.

INTERMISSION



Lord Yunmelngen and the Adviser

About Lord Yunmelngen...

The leader and symbol of the united stronghold territory, the Heavenly Empire.

The ninth Lord, at minimum.

A whole century before the Founder Nebulis revolted, the position of Lord had already existed for individuals chosen through the Ascension Ceremony, which was a ritual kept hidden from the Imperial subjects.

The people did not question this process. After all, the Empire was the best country in the world. They were blessed, and for that reason, they had no reason to object.

“The wealthy do not fight. Proper clothes and proper food make for proper manners. As long as this nation thrives, the public will seek to maintain the status quo and not commit class warfare.”

Yunmelngen’s offices were in a windowless building that was one of the oldest structures within the Imperial capital.

Tinged red, the earthen building had been the sole edifice left standing after the rebellion that had left the land scorched a century ago.

Its interior consisted of four structures.

One of them was a palatial building that contained a four-story tower connected to some glass corridors.

“The Imperial capital is just as quiet as always, *Your Excellency*.”

“Very good, Risya.”

The one greeting her was a bearded man with a large build wearing a military uniform.

The leader, Lord Yunmelngen.

“As reported, the Eight Great Apostles’ plan to capture the queen is underway. The other Saint Disciples have already left the Imperial capital, so I have come to report on that.”

“I see.”

Standing tall in the military uniform, he moved to the side of the glass corridor, jerking his chin toward the hallway.

“The Lord is waiting.”

“Cool. Thanks. And their mood?”

“Bored as usual. They say they’re nearing sixty-three on the boredom scale.”

“We should be fine as long as they don’t go over ninety. Last time they escaped from the Empire, they said they’d encountered Salinger. I’ve never been so rattled to the core.”

Lord Yunmelngen’s body double.

This man served to represent the Lord in the Imperial headquarters, in interviews, and on trips outside the Lord’s offices. He was the *ninth body double*.

There’s only one at the top.

And Lord Yunmelngen hasn’t changed in a hundred years.

At the end of this glass corridor was the topmost floor of the four-story tower, the Heaven Between Insight and Nosight.

The building had been designated by old theologians who had based it upon a domain in heaven accessible only when all earthy desires were abandoned.

The sharp scent of grass tickled Risya’s nose.

“Oh, it seems you’ve gotten new tatami mats again. I can’t stand the smell of rush plants.”

“_____”

“Well, I suppose it’s fine. I’m okay. I’m not complaining. It would be improper for a staff officer to have a complaint against Your Excellency, anyway.”

“_____”

Dozens of tatami mats had been spread underfoot. Risyā took off her shoes and stepped up onto them, then reclined in a relaxed manner.

In front of her eyes...was something looking at her, lying down.

“What do you think, Your Excellency? Of this special mission?”

“_____”

“Well, it does seem fishy. I think the invasion will go well. We’ve already set a good precedent for it, and I think we will make it to the central state, but I would hate for the Eight Great Apostles and Test Subject E to be linked in the shadows.”

She took off her glasses. They got in the way when she was lying down. It was her little habit.

Even in her hazy vision, she could clearly make out the Lord’s outline.

It was a silvery thing, somewhere between a beast and a human.

“What shall we do? Joheim is away. Would you like me to stay with you?”

Risyā’s role was staff officer. Regardless of whether the Eight Great Apostles had a special mission, her original purpose was to serve the Lord.

“_____”

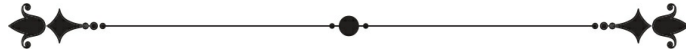
In a whisper quiet enough that it could be heard only by Risyā, the Lord told her something.

“...Well, that is certainly true. I suppose the other Saint Disciples will be upset if I skip out.” Risyā smiled wanly.

She had heard the Lord’s reply.

“I understand. Well, I shall go and think of it as an opportunity to see this Test Subject E. I wonder what kind of monster it’s become.”

CHAPTER 4



Under One Roof

1

The Lou Erz mansion. Alice's private quarters.

Alice hummed to herself as the morning sunlight filtered into her living room.

"Hee-hee. The weather is spectacular. A clear blue sky. Clean air. I feel like I can really unwind on this vacation!"

"Lady Alice."

"Just another day full of hopes and dreams."

"Lady Alice! What has gotten into you? You've been in a good mood all morning..."

Rin peeked at Alice's face. She was in the middle of combing Alice's golden hair, and it seemed Alice's humming had caught her attention.

"Hmm? I feel normal."

"I'm asking you because it doesn't feel normal to me. You've been humming all morning... On any other day, your eyes would be glazed over, and you'd be sporting a gloomy look on your face when you wake up."

"That's because you make me sign documents day in and day out. I don't have to worry about that while I'm at this villa."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Totally."

"...Seems suspect." Rin stroked Alice's golden locks with her hand.

Each strand glittered like spun gold in the sunlight, velvety to the touch, like silk.

“Lady Alice, your hair has a healthy sheen to it this morning.”

“Yeah?”

“And it was easier to apply your makeup, because your skin is glowing... It’s like you’re full of life today.”

Alice’s cheeks were flushed pink.

And that humming. It was natural for Rin to wonder what was going on.

“What happened? I heard you spent the night in Lady Elletear’s room. Did something good go down in there?”

“...Something good, huh? Yes, it was good for the three sisters to sleep together.” Alice’s voice was peppy. “And it was fraught with competition.”

“Pardon me?”

“It was so difficult to keep my voice down so I wouldn’t wake my sisters, but it was a fantastic struggle.”

“...Um... What?”

“What would I expect from a former Saint Disciple? He resisted me like an iron wall of defense. If I just had a little bit longer, I would have been able to uncover his secret... Oh, we did nothing shameful. He saw my undergarments first, so it was a respectable battle to exact my revenge.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about!”

Of course, Alice couldn’t divulge everything. If she told Rin that she’d been trying to tear off Iska’s clothes all night, Rin would look at her differently.

...It’s all right if no one understands.

...Because it’s a battle between me and Iska. As long as it pleases my heart, that’s all that I can ask for.

In the end, Alice had grown tired and fallen asleep.

By the time she’d gotten up, Iska hadn’t been in bed anymore. Even still, her

heart swelled with happiness. She could hardly believe “grappling” with him after their long time apart could have been such an adrenaline rush for her.

“Lady Alice, I’m done with your hair.”

“Thank you. I wonder what I should do today. The weather is nice, so maybe I should spend time outside?”

She went to the veranda to look down at the rear garden. She had flashbacks to her fierce battle against Iska from the night before.

“Isk—wait, no, no.” She wanted to call out to him, but she managed to stop herself.

After all, they were pretending not to know each other. Plus, Rin was behind her. There was no mistaking that Alice calling out to him would put Rin in a sour mood.

“Humph. The Imperial swordsman.”

As Alice had expected, Rin’s mood *had* soured immediately when she caught sight of Iska in the rear garden.

The three others from the Imperial unit were there, each holding golf clubs, ready to use the driving range.

“Those people... Don’t they know they’re on Lou property? They might be guests, but do they really think we should wait on Imperial forces hand and foot? And who led them to the rear garden?”

Alice was very familiar with Iska and Commander Mismis.

The other two had to be Jhin and Nene. She had only exchanged greetings with the pair and didn’t know anything about their personalities.

...It’s probably better if I don’t know.

...It’d be bad if we got along and it caused me to hesitate on the battlefield.

The four Imperial subjects started to play golf as Alice watched them from the balcony. All they were doing was aiming at the net, hitting the balls with their clubs. It was as if they were at a batting cage. This repetition was so dull, Alice had immediately gotten bored of it as a child.

“...They seem to be having fun, Lady Alice.”

“...They do seem to be enjoying themselves.”

All four of them had to be amateurs. They kept missing the ball, clubs swinging through air. Whenever they managed to land a hit, the ball would kind of just roll along the ground rather than soar through the sky. Despite that, they seemed to be having a good time.

“It’s unexpected,” Rin said to herself. “That Imperial swordsman has no problems swinging his sword, but he can’t manage to properly swing a golf club?”

That was right. Iska was the worst out of the four of them. He had physical potential, but his posture was too stiff.

...I’m getting annoyed just watching him.

...Ugh! If only I were there! I could teach him the basics!

Observing from the balcony was making her feel antsy.

Then, Sisbell, who Alice had last seen sleeping in their sister’s room, stepped foot on the practice range. What was the youngest sibling planning on doing? Alice tilted her head, curious...

“Hee-hee, it seems you’re all enjoying yourselves.”

A gentle smile graced her lips as she casually let herself into their group.

“Oh, Iska, the ball won’t go anywhere if you hit it like that.”

“Huh? It won’t?”

“I shall teach you the fundamentals. We need to change the way you hold the club. Oh dear, you’re tensing up your shoulders too much. You need to be more relaxed... Yes...”

Sisbell slipped in next to Iska, wrapping her arms around him as though hugging him from behind. They both held the golf club.

“Th-that little—?!” Alice screeched.

“It seems Lady Sisbell called them to the golf range... I wonder why she’d go out of her way to entertain Imperial soldiers.”

Rin seemed genuinely puzzled, but Alice could figure it out.

This exact moment was what Sisbell was after. Sisbell held Iska's club with him. To Alice's eyes, it looked almost exactly like a bride and groom slicing through a wedding cake together.

...She's trying to lay her hands on my rival again!

...Not just Iska. She's trying to walk off with all four members to herself!

Alice was sure Iska wouldn't yield, and she doubted the three others would betray the Empire, either...but it was hard to reason away an emotional response. When she saw her little sister trying to press up against Iska, Alice just could not keep her mind composed.

"...I'll lecture some sense into that girl later."

"Lady Alice, you look ridiculous. Please take care not to say your good-byes with that face."

"...Say good-bye?"

Come again? Alice froze in place as Rin scowled at her.

"But it's too early to let the Imperial troops leave."

"Not them. Lady Alice, remember your own duties. Didn't you strike a deal last night?" Rin softly whispered into her ear, "Lady Elletear is heading home. The queen is waiting at the palace."

2

The Lou Erz mansion. Third floor.

"Lady Sisbell, I've brought you a new towel."

"...Thank you. Please leave it there. I need to change."

The servant exited the room. As the door shut behind her, Sisbell quenched her thirst with cold water, drying the sweat dripping down her neck with a towel. She took off her shirt, undressing down to her underwear.

"...Did I really just do that?"

Her face was reflected in the full-length mirror, slightly red from the game of golf. It was supposed to have been a bit of passing whimsy.

...It's just a way to pass the time while we're trapped in the villa.

...Otherwise, my heart might break from worrying too much about my missing attendant.

She had taught the Imperial soldiers the basics of the game since they hadn't played before, and that had been...fun. At first, she had planned to only observe, but she had ended up teaching them, which had turned into a demonstration, which had led to her mingling with the four Imperial soldiers and enjoying herself.

...This is bad. They're enemy troops.

...They're becoming more than just my guards.

She'd sweated so much, she needed a change of clothes. She'd been lost in the game.

The wind stirred. The summer breeze blowing in from the window felt nice on her sticky skin. She forgot about changing and let herself be tickled by the wind.

"Sisbell, it isn't even noon yet. Have you already tired yourself out?"

Instantly, the pleasant warmth of her skin dropped a million degrees. Sisbell felt as if she'd plunged into an icy ocean.

"Is that you, Sister?!"

"I did knock, but you didn't answer, so I let myself in."

The voice came from behind her.

Sisbell didn't even have time to turn around before Elletear squeezed her from behind. She couldn't move. Her older sister had caught her with the force of a predator clamping down on its prey.

"Wha...? What do you need...?" Sisbell managed to rasp out.

Something is different about her.

It feels almost as though my sister is a different person from last night.

Sisbell could tell because she was her younger sister. There was a mechanical tone to her sister's soft words. Her voice seemed disinterested, as though Elletear were addressing a roadside pebble.

"I'm in the middle of changing... And I thought you were returning to the palace..."

"I came to say good-bye," Elletear murmured. "I had a blast, Sisbell. You never hang out with me. You lock yourself up in your room and even have your food brought to you. You're always just with your attendant, right?"

"I-I..."

"Oh, yes, yes. About your attendant..." The eldest sister chuckled under her breath.

Her chest pushed onto her younger sister's back as though riding on top of Sisbell.

"I imagine Shuvalts was kidnapped. You've been through so much."

"_____Uh?!"

Her attendant had been kidnapped? How could Elletear say that with such *certainty*?

Shuvalts's whereabouts were unknown. His correspondence had been cut off since he'd entered the central state...but they had not determined he had been kidnapped just yet.

...I can't claim he wasn't in a traffic accident or hospitalized for an illness.

...Even I haven't been able to uncover why Shuvalts has disappeared!

Only the person who had attacked him could know the truth.

In other words...

"...Uh...ah..."

Her vocal cords weren't cooperating. The culprit was right here.

"Well, Sisbell. It seems that you're giving your best to find new recruits."

"Lord Mask?! Wh-why are you here...?"

The informant who had tipped Lord Mask off about her mission in Alsamira.

The one responsible for kidnapping her attendant, Shuvalts.

...The traitor to the Lou family.

...So it was you, my sister!

Sisbell was too frightened to articulate it. Her teeth chattered, and her lips dried up from nerves.

“Oh my... What’s gotten into you? You’re shivering. Did the wind get you? You’re practically naked. Your frail body can’t take it.”

Elletear’s hands tensed to squeeze Sisbell with an even tighter grip.

“If you have anything that ails you, your older sister will hear you out.”

“S-Sister...”

“You’re going to be all right.”

The force against her back abruptly ceased.

“As long as you *obediently stay* in the mansion, your attendant will come back to you... That’s what my instinct tells me.”

“—————Gh!”

Sisbell turned around as if she had been spring-loaded.

But her older sister Elletear had long since left the room.

The Lou Erz mansion. Eastern wing.

“All right. Only eighteen more to go, seventeen, sixteen... Commander, you’re more sluggish than usual.”

“B-because...we were just golfing! I can barely move!”

They were in the hallway inside Iska’s guest suite.

Commander Mismis was repping squats, carrying Nene on her shoulders. Jhin and Iska had finished their drills already, taking a break on the sidelines.

“Golf? All you were doing was swinging your club at nothing, boss.”

“Like. I. Said. That’s not because I have bad hand-eye coordination. I’m telling you, the ball kept running away from my club!”

“There’s no scientific proof of such a phenomenon.”

“But there is! I swear! ...Ugh. Raising my voice is just making this worse...!”
The petite commander staggered, pouring sweat. “N-Nene...how many more?”

“Twenty-five left.”

“I thought it was less! You tacked on more, didn’t you?!”

Her death throes echoed through the space.

In the living room, Iska realized Jhin was doing nothing for once, sitting on a chair by the table.

“Jhin, aren’t you going to inspect your guns—? Oh. Right.”

“They were confiscated. Like your astral swords.” Jhin leaned into the chair.

That was why it felt as if something was missing. Jhin always looked after his guns as part of his daily routine. In the Imperial capital, the independent state of Alsamira, and the Sovereignty, he had done so each day without fail.

...Because being a sniper demands the most attention to detail.

...Jhin must feel restless, not being able to touch his guns for so long.

Of course, Iska was in the same boat. He could almost feel the astral swords in his hands, and visualizations were part of his everyday practice. He was worried about how his seized weapons were being stored.

“Iska.”

“Hmm?”

“That phony woman confiscated our weapons and communicators, but they say she headed home in the morning.”

Iska knew whom Jhin was talking about even when she went unnamed.

The eldest princess, Elletear. She had claimed to have connections with the Empire as a double agent, but they had no way of confirming such claims.

“What about our equipment? If she walked off with them, there’s nothing we

can do.”

“...I really don’t think she would have.”

Maybe they could ask the servants? Well, it was hard to think they would give them a straight answer...at least not without orders from the other princesses.

...I can’t ask Alice. We still have to keep our relationship from the others.

...And if I ask Sisbell, then I’ll end up owing her a weird favor later...

They heard a hesitant knock come from outside the room. Nene and Commander Mismis stopped their training in front of the door and opened it.

Even Iska could hear the two of them gulping.

“Sisbell?”

The strawberry blonde walked down the hall toward them.

What did this mean?

She’d been so cheery during their game of golf earlier. Now she was deathly pale, as though the light had slipped from her eyes.

“_____”

The youngest princess collapsed in front of them, crumpling to her knees on the carpet. Right before she could crash onto the floor, Iska caught her.

“What’s wrong?” Jhin asked.

“Ms. Sisbell? Are you okay?!” Mismis screamed.

This was not normal.

Jhin stood up from his seat. Commander Mismis rushed after the girl. She was surrounded by the four Imperial soldiers.

“...Iska...” Sisbell looked up at him.

Iska involuntarily held his breath. He saw Princess Sisbell was biting her lip, desperately holding back tears.

“I just...realized...”

Realized what?

Before he could ask, Sisbell squeezed his arm tight. She clung to him with all her might.

“My sister Elletear is the traitor... I’m sure she’s behind the scenes, trying to betray the queen!”

3

The royal palace.

The Moon Spire stretched up into the blue skies.

It served as the official residence of the Zoa, who were descendants of the Founder, and all those who served within the tower worshipped the ideologies of the family.

A secret underground room—Moon Shadow—was surrounded by four-layered walls; it was an extension that had been constructed by the current head of household after the main tower had been built.

It was a room unknown to the Lou and Hydra. Even Sisbell’s Illumination power could not eavesdrop on their conversations in this room as long as she was not privy to its location.

“Elletear of the Lou has just returned to the royal palace from the family villa.”

Six members of the Zoa were lined up in the room. All of them were part of the Founder’s bloodline—purebreds who possessed potent astral energy.

“We just received the news. It seems she’s refused an audience with the queen, citing her ailing health.”

The speaker was a man in a formal suit, face concealed behind a mask.

Lord Mask On was something like a staff officer within the Zoa.

“I don’t imagine she’ll come out of her room today or tomorrow. It does make me wonder what she must be biding her time for.”

“...That girl.” A hoarse voice quietly snarled in the secret room.

This was the Zoa head of household, Growley, known as the Sin. His frail seventy-year-old body was propped up by a wheelchair. Though he sported deep wrinkles from old age, everyone knew he was the most fearful astral mage among the Zoa.

“I remember...the birth...of the eldest princess...twenty years ago... When I saw her astral power...I was certain of our victory...in the next conclave.”

Her skill was useless. Elletear’s Voice could memorize and mimic voices she’d heard.

“But it can only parrot things. I was convinced she could not become queen with that...”

That had been their folly.

Elletear had shown the Zoa that she could manipulate her powers in unthinkable ways. Like in the plot to assassinate the queen.

“Good-bye, Lou bloodline.”

Eyewitnesses, including the queen’s direct reports, had all claimed they heard Lord Mask right before the explosion in the Queen’s Space. That had become the circumstantial evidence needed to put the Zoa under suspension.

They were suspects until the true perpetrator was caught.

“On... She got you...,” rasped Growley.

“Indeed. I hadn’t been able to wrap my mind around it.” Lord Mask shrugged. “The voice in the Queen’s Space was *fabricated* by the princess’s astral power. She was trying to pin the blame on me.”

Elletear had been nearly engulfed in flames during the explosion. There was no way that she was behind it. She must have, however, predicted the reigning queen would be able to block the detonation.

“That’s where the Hydra got involved. They were behind the explosion, and Elletear fabricated my voice in time with its blast. That is the truth...which I reached the other day.”

“On... Did you tell the queen?”

“No need. The youngest princess will return in due time. She will reproduce the scheme and reveal the true culprit in front of everyone.”

The sky was going to fall—the Sun and the Stars, the Hydra and Lou, and all. It was time for the Moon—the Zoa—to shine down on the world.

“There is one issue that concerns me.” Lord Mask looked at the ceiling, arms crossed. “That girl is smart. Elletear knows it’s only a matter of time before her sister’s astral power will reveal her collusion with the Hydra. Why would she go to the lengths to do this...?”

“You think there is an ulterior motive?”

“That is how I read the situation.” Lord Mask nodded at Growley. “She may have something else up her sleeve. Kissing, that’s where you come in.” He beckoned to the girl next to him.

Kissing Zoa Nebulis, purebred Witch of Thorns.

Both eyes were concealed, just like when Iska had met the black-haired girl in the past. It was said that one day she would exceed Aliceliese if she kept up with her special training.

“We need to remain on our guard. Should something happen, it will likely take place in the next few days.”

The toll of the eleven o’clock bell pealed through the night.

All the servants of the Lou Erz mansion wrapped up their professional duties, relaxing in that hour.

“She’s nothing but guilty. She basically confessed to it.”

Inside Sisbell’s room, Unit 907 had finished watching the conversation via Illumination.

Jhin continued. “Your sister must have planned the kidnapping of your old man Shuvalts. Otherwise, she never would have asked if he was kidnapped.”

“Jhin?!” Mismis yelped.

“She asked for our honest opinions. I was just answering her question.”

"I-I know, but the way you said it...," Mismis interjected when Jhin didn't mince his words.

Sisbell was silent on the sofa, chewing on her lip to endure her discomfort as her hand formed a fist over her thighs.

It was too painful for Iska to watch.

"Hey, Jhin," he ventured.

"Mm?"

"...Why do you think she revealed that to us?"

"Who knows? My only guess is to serve as a diversion. That last bit about obediently remaining in the mansion was basically a threat to stay put or else."

"So that includes all of us?"

"Probably. It's just..."

The silver-haired sniper leaned against the wall...with his favorite *sniper rifle* slung across his shoulder.

"She doesn't care what happens inside the mansion. It's not like she forbade us from recovering the confiscated weapons."

Mismis and Nene were armed, too.

Iska was in possession of his black and white astral swords, which were laid out on the table. Sisbell had found all the weapons in the residence's storage room.

That had been a silent act of resistance against her oldest sister. This was the one thing she could do.

"So what do you want to do, little miss employer? Even if you've handed us our weapons, you can't order us to go to the palace to exact revenge on your sister," Jhin muttered.

"...I don't intend to do that."

Her voice was firm. Iska almost doubted his ears.

"My sister has returned to the palace. The queen will interrogate her

regardless and ask why she's keeping me locked up in this villa."

"And?"

"The rest will be settled with time. I will return to the palace in eight days to expose everyone behind the plot to assassinate the queen. That will be the end of it."

"You think you'll make it in time?"

"...Huh?"

"If I were in your position, I'd use the opportunity to bare your fangs, so to speak."

That rattled Sisbell. "What do you even mean?!"

"Head straight to the palace right now. Then expose the culprit using your astral power. You haven't got the luxury of waiting here for eight days."

"Huh?! I-if I were to do that, then Shuvalts's life would be..."

"He might be in danger, but I've got one thing to say. There's greater odds of something unimaginable happening if you sit tight in this villa."

"...Is it because of the ten-day promise? You think my oldest sister will act in that time frame?"

"That's exactly it," spat the silver-haired sniper. "If you're not going to do anything, at least be prepared to return to the palace at any moment."

"You're so nice."

"Mm?"

"You don't need to give me advice. It doesn't fall under the purview of the mission. Are you advising me because you're worried for my welfare?"

"..." Jhin didn't respond.

Sisbell burst into laughter. "I'm greatly obliged to you. I won't forget this."

All of them were sick with nerves.

Time continued in silence. As the Imperial soldiers guarded Sisbell, they found nothing was amiss that day in the family villa.

It was eleven o'clock at night, a whole day after Elletear had left the vacation home.

"...Seems strange."

At the table in her room, Alice pouted, propping her head up in her hand.

"For two days, Iska and Sisbell have both been avoiding me like the plague. There's something going on. What do you think?"

"That's how they should be acting."

Across from her was Rin, lining up her assassination tools, totally engrossed in the process of examining them. Two throwing knives, needles, and steel wires. Plus, poison and sedatives. Alice was always impressed Rin carried these things in secret around the clock.

"Lady Sisbell has always been shy, and the Imperial swordsman must be keeping his mouth shut so that no one knows your relationship with him, Lady Alice."

"That's not it. It's like...I'm not sure how to put it. It's like they're trying to keep a secret from me?"

She had felt that way passing by them in the hall.

Something about Sisbell looked different. It might have changed after their older sister had left for the palace? Sisbell's expression seemed unusually stout, as if she was preparing for something.

...I'd like to ask Iska about it.

...But I can't just do anything in this mansion.

He was here with her under the same roof. This kind of situation wasn't anything new, but it was so exhausting to pretend they didn't know each other in front of the servants.

It made her feel icky.

Even if she managed to talk to him in secret, she was worried that her younger sister was listening in on the conversation through her astral powers.

...Ugh. Even for my little sister, that's an absurd skill to have.

...I hate that I can't have a moment of privacy.

However, that was exactly why her sister's astral powers were necessary. When it came to the attempt on the queen's life, Sisbell would always be able to get to the truth.

Speaking of suspects...

"Rin, how is my sister Elletear?"

"She only just returned to the palace yesterday but immediately felt ill, so she retired to her room last night." She tucked the blades under her skirt and hid the wire in her sleeve.

To Alice's eyes, it looked almost like magic, like the deadly tools were vanishing into thin air. Her guard was blessed with many gifts.

"Her Majesty gave Lady Elletear permission to rest for one night. That was yesterday, so I believe she will have an audience in the Queen's Space tonight."

"...I wonder if it's happening right around now."

The queen would ask why Elletear had taken Sisbell to the villa.

In a sense, this would be an inquisition.

"I wouldn't be happy about it if I were in her shoes."

"Yes, I'm sure the queen is in the same boat. When push comes to shove, it might necessitate that she imprison her own daughter. I'm sure she is prepared to do whatever is needed."

"..." That left Alice with a bitter taste in her mouth.

A battle between blood, schemes behind closed doors. They'd all learned to notice clues and conceal their true intentions. But she would never get used to this caged feeling.

The conclave had already begun.

"Rin, let's go to the bath. I'd like to take my time and—"

The communicator started to go off under her gaze.

It had to be an emergency.

Shadows became deeper, thicker, stronger under the night sky.

It was chilly. The atmosphere was getting sapped of afternoon warmth as the sun sank below the horizon.

“Elletear, have you ever been afraid of the night?”

“Never. And you, Mother?”

“Sometimes. At this age, I’ve begun to find the nighttime chill haunting.”

There was no air conditioner in the Queen’s Space. Though she questioned the century-long tradition, Queen Mirabella felt she had finally understood the reason for it.

She could feel her body’s natural decline through these sensations.

This was the way the Queen’s Space informed her that it was time for her replacement.

“Aging is hard. I thought I looked young for my age, and I’ve been secretly trying to work out to keep in shape.”

“Mother.” The emerald-haired princess’s tone suddenly softened. “Please don’t say something so sad. I need you to continue fulfilling your duties for some time to come.”

“No, Elletear, I’m not upset about my physical decline.”

“Pray tell?”

“It’s because my daughters are feuding with each other. That’s what brings me sorrow.”

The air seemed to freeze over...from a chilly sigh far colder than the night.

“Elletear, why did you take Sisbell to the villa?”

“...”

“I’m currently in pursuit of two criminals. One behind the coup eight days ago. The other one responsible for telling the Zoa about Sisbell’s location. In both of those cases, I will be able to find the culprits once she is back.”

Elletear had obstructed that from happening.

That meant she would be in some kind of trouble if the youngest daughter returned.

“I’ve determined that the culprit behind the blast was either the Zoa or the Hydra. The issue is nailing down which one. The explosion occurred just as I approached that door. In other words, it’s likely that someone within the Queen’s Space gave the instruction for it.”

But what had triggered that explosion?

It had been a certain voice.

“Good-bye, Lou bloodline.”

That hadn’t been a proclamation that they were starting a coup d’état.

It had been a cue informing someone outside the door that Queen Nebulis IIX had approached.

“Elletear, that’s all possible with your astral power.”

“...”

“You could fabricate Lord Mask’s voice. I put much thought into this. You could have signaled the detonation and charged the Zoa with the blame.”

“Please wait a moment, Mother!” yelled the eldest princess. It was as if the floodgates had opened. “I would never plot something so awful. I would have died in the blast without you!”

“...”

“Isn’t that right? Had the explosion been successful, I would have been sacrificed as part of the greater scheme. And now you suspect me! I lose in both cases!”

“...You’re right about that.” The queen sighed. “I am sorry, Elletear. I want to believe you’re innocent here, but I cannot eliminate you from the suspect list at present.”

“I would understand if you would like to put me under confinement. Until my sisters come back, I will not take a single step out of my room.”

“About Sisbell...”

“Mother, you can tell her she may *return to the palace* now.” The eldest daughter grinned.

As if to twirl around in a circle, she checked the hour on the clock tower behind her.

“Just on time.”

“Huh?”

The queen had no time to process her daughter’s cryptic words.

The witches’ paradise started to shake violently.

A thunderous impact blasted through the night.

“What?!” Queen Mirabella lost her footing as the ground jerked out from under her. It was as though the Nebulis palace were being flipped from its foundations.

“What...? Impossible...”

Was it an earthquake? It couldn’t be.

As an astral mage who’d had her fair share of fights, Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX recalled that this...was an Imperial bombardment.

This was the central state of the Nebulis Sovereignty.

A sacred area that no Imperial forces had ever invaded before.

“No...! It couldn’t be!”

She sprinted up the steps of the Queen’s Space to the second floor.

From the recently repaired window, she glanced down at the scene—and saw pure crimson. The queen was at a loss for words.

The palace was up in flames.

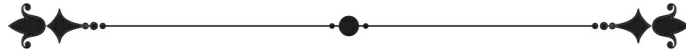
Embers flickered in the sky as the courtyard was encased in fire.

There was nothing amiss in the streets that stretched from the palace.

Only the Planetary Stronghold had been set ablaze through the Imperial

forces' concentrated attack.

IN SECRET



Forty-Eight Hours/Twenty-Four Hours Before the Raid

Two days earlier.

The morning that Unit 907 had been invited to the Lou family villa.

“It seems the Imperial troops have passed the Sovereign borders. They seem to be elite forces handpicked by the Saint Disciples.”

“Things are going well. Now we wait for the invasion. Let’s hope our own are confined within our spire.”

A handsome man and woman were together on the terrace, where the morning light filtered into the Solar Spire, the residence of the Hydra.

“We need the Imperial forces to be the ones to take the queen’s life.” The muscular man in his prime slowly lowered himself into a chair.

He was the head of household, Talisman, the Wave.

His pure white suit showed not a wrinkle. His features were chiseled and handsomely arranged, neat dull gray hair making him a rather dandy forty-year-old gentleman.

“The trouble will come with your younger sisters, I suppose. Alice, in particular.”

“Yes, she’s the strongest in the House of Lou. I’m proud of her, as her older sister.”

The eldest princess, Elletear, was seated across from him.

Her legs were crossed in an alluring way, as if she had calculated even her mannerisms.

“If Alice devotes herself to protecting the queen, even the Imperial forces

would not be able to lay a hand on her. The palace is already a disadvantageous place for the Imperial forces to attack.”

“Then it seems we must separate the queen and little Alice somehow.”

“About that matter...”

Elletear leaned forward. She stooped, letting her cleavage hang from her décolletage.

“I was thinking of going on a vacation. To the Lou family villa.”

“And what has put you in that spirit?” he asked, skeptical.

“You said Alice is an inconvenience, Lord Talisman, but we must remove Sisbell from the picture first. If she returns to the palace, then the Hydra are as good as done. She’ll expose the full particulars of the blast at the Queen’s Space, and the House of Hydra will be banished.”

Nebulis IIX would rule with an iron fist.

If that happened, the effects of the Imperial raid would be short-lived.

“I will capture my sister and take her to the villa and basically obstruct her return to the castle. I’m sure that’ll let us have some fun.”

“...” The head of household stroked his chin, thinking it over.

He was silent for only a few seconds. This man was known for his sagacity and saw through Elletear’s scheme with lightning speed.

“I see. Then Alice will try to bring back her self-centered older sister...making her head to the villa and leave the queen’s side.”

“Excellent, my lord. With that, Nebulis IIX will be the only one in the castle.”

They could induce Aliceliese’s absence, which would remove the strongest weapon in the palace. They could put a stop to Sisbell and even eliminate Alice from the queen’s side—and from the equation altogether.

“We lure Alice and Sisbell to the villa. That’s when the Imperial forces will strike the queen. I see—two birds with one stone.”

“Oh, my lord.” Elletear giggled—in her lovely way. “It’s *four birds with one stone*.”

“Oh?”

“You’ll see. Just by detaining the youngest princess in the villa, we will end the current queen’s rule.”

“In that case, we would have a conclave immediately. I imagine the Zoa would prepare their candidate, but I wonder what would happen with the Lou. Would you compete, Elletear?”

“No.” The eldest of the Lou sisters shook her head. “I have tired of the Sovereignty itself. If I can destroy it, I have no interest in what happens after. I’ll leave the rest to you, my lord.”

“How delightful. Well, I must make sure you have someone to deliver you to the Star Spire—Commander Orneik?”

The head of household snapped his fingers. As the sound faded under the morning sun, a man in a suit knelt in front of Elletear.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess.”

“And who are you?” Elletear opened her eyes wide in surprise, cocking her head.

She did not recognize him as one of the Planetary Domiciles, who protected the royal family. Then again, the royal guards would never wear a suit like this.

“He’s a commander that the Hydra have independently employed as part of an intelligence unit. He is first-class—a competent guard and an excellent assassin.”

“I see. It would be a waste to recommend him to become one of the Planetary Domiciles.”

Planetary Domiciles were the highest-order guards, the Sovereign equivalent of the Saint Disciples. However, a person’s name became public information if they registered to become a Planetary Domicile. In other words, the Hydra had purposefully kept him in reserve as a secret game piece.

“I assume he was listening to our conversation?” Elletear said.

“You need not worry. He is loyal only to the Hydra. He would never talk. And there is no being who could capture him by force.”

The guard in the suit stood up.

As would be befitting for an intelligence unit, his conduct was perfect.

“Intelligence Commander Orneik, please escort the princess.”

“That would be an honor...,” Elletear said. “Then, my lord, I shall go on my vacation as planned.”

“Yes. All we will need to do is wait for the Imperial forces.”

Such was the plot to capture the queen.

After the queen was apprehended through Imperial raid, the subjects would lose their faith in the House of Lou, and a new queen would be born.

It had all started three queens ago. The plan that had been incubating under the Hydra for the last half century would finally be realized.

The next day.

The night before the raid of the Nebulis palace.

Orneik from the intelligence unit had received a secret order.

It was the day that Elletear was returning to the palace from the villa. He exchanged places with her to lie in wait and surveil the youngest princess.

According to Talisman, the head of the Hydra, he was a top-class assassin. And as for this man...

“—How trifling.”

He was being *treaded upon*. He had been pushed down into the garden, head trampled by a shoe—such was the humiliation he was being subjected to.

“A coup to assassinate the queen. I was wondering which of the Founder’s descendants organized it. I see. So they were just preparing to call in the Imperial forces.”

“...You... I never...expected you to be here. How could you? You’re Mirabella’s —”

“Your voice grates my ears.” The person delivered a kick to Orneik’s head.

He lost consciousness.

"I'm the only one who may call her Mirabella. Know that by doing so, you are not disrespecting the queen—but me."

Bathed by the moonlight...as though receiving the benediction of the night sky itself, a man with white hair stood majestically.

The transcendental sorcerer Salinger.

This was the felon who had invaded the Nebulis palace thirty years ago and assaulted the then queen. Even in his fifties, he had managed to keep his physique and face looking like those of a man in his early twenties. Rather than decaying, in fact, he seemed to grow even stronger.

"The Founder's descendants. The blood of the Hydra..."

His foot smashed into the assassin's head.

Though he had fought one of the Hydra's best men, he had come out unscathed—without so much as a speck of dust on his coat.

"Hah. I'd wondered who had been up to this. Of course it was the Hydra," he spat.

He had acquired necessary information from this underling. Just as planned.

*"So it's all the same as *thirty years ago*..."*

He turned around.

The outline of the Lou Erz mansion was lit by the lamps.

"..."

Though he hadn't wished for it, a memory of *her* drifted into his memory.

There had been a confrontation on a tranquil night like this one.

"You're so persistent. Did you follow me all the way to my villa, Salinger?"

"I didn't follow you. I'm after your astral power, Mira."

"So you're asking me to battle you again? Alas, I must refuse."

"...What?"

"This is my cherished spot. It would be a problem if you were to make a mess here. If you would like a duel, I will take you up on it later...as many times as

you'd like."

It'd been thirty years and a handful of months.

Salinger had confronted a young Mirabella at this exact residence. She had been so beautiful...and incredibly powerful.

Not just because of her astral power. It had to do with her personhood. At thirteen, she had already been the most powerful candidate for the throne in history.

Salinger had been the one and only challenger in her lifetime.

"...Tsk."

"I like that you retreat from my attacks like that. It makes you stand apart from a barbarian."

"Are you trying to make a mockery of me?"

"I'm praising you. You know, I don't dislike that part about you."

"..."

"Let's leave this for another occasion. What day and time work for you? I would like it if it were on an auspicious day."

"...How trite. You want to plan out a duel?"

"Yes. A certain artist once said that a marriage and a duel are cut of the same cloth. I would like to make sure it's the best day for a battle. So that neither of us have regrets."

"Hah. Are you saying our duel...is a love story?"

"Make it sound more poetic. 'Our last crusade or the love in a new world.' Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?"

It would have been—should have been—a life-risking duel.

Salinger had assaulted young Mira to steal her astral power, and she had driven him back. That was how it always was.

So when did things change? Salinger had started to cherish their fights, wishing their relationship would continue like that forever.

Except everything changed...thirty years ago, when he carried out his assassination scheme.

“Back then it was *me*. Now it’s the *Imperial forces* as their cover. Ha-ha. Very funny, Hydra. Those who unite under the sun always scheme to take the throne in the shadows.”

It was unlikely anyone would arrive at the conclusion that the Imperial raid had been arranged by the Hydra.

“Why?! Salinger! Answer me!”

“...”

“Why would you resort to such savagery? Why would you assault the queen... and not me...? I thought you weren’t the type of man who would do something like this!”

It had all been the same thirty years ago.

The rotten sorcerer had invaded the palace to steal the queen’s astral power, according to rumors. Even the only eyewitness—Mira—believed that to be the case.

—I don’t ever intend to tell her the truth.

Their paths had already diverged.

That was because their crusade—their dream—had already been stolen from them, never to be returned.

“Mira...no, Queen Mirabella...”

He turned his back to the mansion.

This had been her favorite mansion. It wasn’t fit for someone who walked down a different path in life.

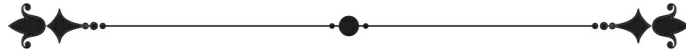
“You’re the queen of this country. You should risk your life to protect your beliefs. I won’t meddle with your affairs.”

The man with white hair spun around...his horrid eyes focusing on the Nebulis palace.

Twenty-four hours later.

The Planetary Stronghold that he'd beheld had been engulfed in flames from a raid by the Imperial troops.

CHAPTER 5



As Paradise Begins to Fall

1

"Alice, listen closely."

The hand gripping the communicator wouldn't stop shaking.

It was getting hard to breathe. She'd never felt so panicked before. Reflected in the mirror was Alice, drained of all color.

"The Imperial forces? ...The palace has been raided...?"

"It's possible. It happened so suddenly, I still cannot completely grasp the situation. What is certain is that the palace has been bombarded."

The queen was speaking on the other side.

Upon witnessing the outside world from the Queen's Space, she had contacted Alice immediately.

...It's customary for the queen to summon her direct reports when unforeseen circumstances present themselves.

...Collecting information is of utmost importance.

The queen had abandoned that procedure to call Alice...for obvious reasons.

She was requesting their trump card—in other words, Aliceliese the Ice Calamity Witch, the greatest weapon against the Imperial forces.

"Rin! Prepare the car!"

"At once." The attendant practically flew out of the room.

"We do not know the enemy formation and cannot even guess how the

Imperial forces crossed the borders. However, we must postpone those questions for later."

"Your Majesty!" Alice managed to shout. "I will be there in two hours. Please stay safe!"

"I intend to."

Bzt. The communicator buzzed audibly as the queen hung up.

They hadn't even talked for two minutes. The queen had spoken in fragments, and Alice still hadn't processed everything.

"...And at a time like this!"

Her body had been chilled to the core from the night breeze, but now, her blood was boiling.

What terrible timing.

Alice had left the palace and gone to the villa only the day before yesterday. In just those two days, the Imperial forces had attacked.

...Did they know the Ice Calamity Witch was away?

...How would they? The only ones who know my situation are related to the Lou.

She was going to assume it was a coincidence.

If she dived into conspiracy theories now, she might act in a way that wasn't in accordance with the truth. There was one thing to do. To return to the palace and defeat the enemy as soon as possible.

"Hang in there, Mother!" She dashed into the hallway with her communicator still in hand.

From the third floor of the western wing, she raced down the stairs to the front entrance. Before she could turn the final corner, Alice failed to notice the figure coming toward her.

A boy with blackish-brown hair.

"Whoa!"

“Iska?!”

Alice couldn't slow down fast enough. Had Iska not stepped back, they would have had a head-on collision in the reception hall. Alice reflexively turned around to face him.

There's no way.

“Alice? What's wrong? Why were you running so fast down the hall?”

The Imperial soldier looked at her innocently.

Alice stared directly back at him. With the raid underway as his unit stayed in the Sovereignty... They couldn't possibly be unrelated. It would be too much of a coincidence.

...It couldn't be you, right? This wasn't the doing of one of your friends, right?

...Don't tell me you helped the Imperial forces hide themselves?

Her face stiffened.

Iska must have picked up on that. “...Alice?”

“I'm heading back to the palace right now.” She tried to sound firm, barely managing to stop her voice from shaking. “Promise me one thing. *I want to believe this has nothing to do with you.* So if you want to prove that's true, stay in the mansion. Don't take a step outside.”

“Wh-what are you talking—?”

“Do not go outside under any circumstances. If you show any sign of collusion with the Imperial army, I won't forgive you!”

“The Imperial army? What do you mean? What happened?!”

“_____”

He stretched his hand out to her.

Just before he could touch her, Alice shrugged off his hand, turning away from him. She bit her lip.

There was no time. She didn't have the time to interrogate Iska here.

...You already know, Alice.

...Iska and his unit have nothing to do with this.

She had realized that at a glance.

His face said he knew nothing. That wasn't the face of someone trying to deceive her. The Imperial swordsman had always been awkward, and she already knew he was a terrible liar.

That was why she needed to pick up speed and get to the palace right now.

Alice barreled down the front stairway to run away from Iska and headed into the dusky garden.

"Lady Alice, over here!" Rin beckoned her over to the parked car.

With Rin in the driver's seat, Alice leaped into the back.

"I expect the road to the palace to be blocked by Imperial forces. Please forgive me. It will be a rough ride."

"Where are my clothes?"

"Inside the suitcase. There is no time for you to change. Please do so while we're en route."

Her white royal battle dress was made to order, a custom fit for Princess Aliceliese. Its luminescent fibers would allow the astral corps to recognize her even in the low visibility of night.

"Rin, hit the pedal. Make sure we get there in under two hours."

"Yes, my lady."

Cadillac One screeched ahead.

After observing the night through the bulletproof glass, Alice closed her eyes.

The Lou Erz mansion. The foyer.

"Alice? What happened? And what was that about the Imperial forces...?!"

The blond witch had not divulged any details. In fact, she almost had, but she'd had to scramble outside before she could even start.

...There was obviously something panicked about her behavior.

...Plus, that expression on her face. It wasn't like she was mad or sad or anything.

And she had said the words *Imperial army*.

"Iska? What's the matter? If you shout in the halls at this time of night, it carries through the mansion."

The youngest princess had come from down the hall. She was carrying a bag with a change of clothes as though she were just about to head to the bath.

"Sisbell!"

"Ahhh?! Wh-what is it, Iska...? Oh, wait... Have you finally decided to work for me?"

"I need to ask you for a favor. I want you to come with me to Alice's room."

"P-pardon me?" She blinked at him in surprise when Iska grabbed her shoulders. "Were we summoned by my sister?"

"...It must have taken place a few minutes ago. I want you to reproduce whatever happened in Alice's room."

2

The Planetary Stronghold rose over the Nebulis Sovereignty.

The castle had been created using crystallizing astral powers a century ago, when the country had become independent. The structure was organic and quite different from a human castle. If it could be likened to anything, it was like terrestrial coral.

Like a coral reef stark against the bright-blue ocean, the Planetary Stronghold glittered rainbow against the jet-black sky.

"Wow. That thing looks solid. It's so bright that we don't need any lights."

Imperial machine guns hadn't managed to leave a single dent on the outside walls of the palace. The few pieces that chipped away were restoring themselves instantly with astral power.

A soldier with the untamed air of a beast was looking up at that Planetary Stronghold.

“Names,” she called out behind her, where there wasn’t the presence of a single person.

The Saint Disciple of the third seat. Mei, the Incessant Tempest.

Her inhuman senses had gathered that some invisible entity was silently standing there.

“Aren’t you sixty-five seconds late getting to your post? Doesn’t seem all that like you.”

“It’s within the margin of error,” rumbled a low voice from right next to Mei. Not a single member of the astral corps had noticed Saint Disciple Nameless hidden in full-body fiber-optic camouflage.

“The area, including the gardens, is approximately five million square yards in size. Seventeen selected locations are being simultaneously bombarded. The number of weapons we could carry across the border, however, was extremely limited.”

“C’mon, we already knew that in advance. That’s no excuse to be late.”

“This thing is flame resistant.”

“Hmm? So it was hard to light this structure on fire?”

“This fortification is alive. You wouldn’t even be able to get a small fire started without dousing the place in gasoline.”

The Nebulis palace was a nest of micro astral energy. When it sensed fire, its powers would activate and concentrate to smother it.

However...behind the two Saint Disciples, embers like those from a volcanic eruption were raging.

The seventeen locations that Nameless spoke of were handled by each of the Empire’s assassination units, who had concealed themselves several hours prior and attacked at the same time.

“We made use of rush firebombs. Hence the sixty-five second delay.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess it’s fine, but weren’t we going to use those firebombs as a last resort to make the inner citadel fall? Like for the queen’s castle?”

“*Possibly.*” He was blunt.

It almost sounded as though he was shirking responsibility, but this unforeseen issue wouldn’t cause the slightest change to their plan. It was the first time the Imperial forces were seeing the stronghold; unanticipated events were to be expected.

They were Saint Disciples because they could find instant solutions...by force.

“Huh? Where’s Jo?”

“A whole step ahead of us. He’s heading to the Queen’s Shrine,” answered a Saint Disciple arriving at the bright-red battleground.

The Saint Disciple of the fifth seat. Risya.

“Apparently he’s taking the best soldiers from Special Division Six to crush the enemy’s defenses.”

“Fine by me. I’ll catch up to him anyway.” In her sleeveless battle uniform, Mei flashed a bright smile, baring her sharp canines. “Risya, are you joining in on the competition? Let’s see who can capture the queen first.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Then how about you, Names?”

“*Do as you please—for as long as you can, that is.*”

This master silent killer made no use of guns. He snorted.

“*Every last being in this palace is a monster. If you let your guard down, the hunter will become the hunted. Your flesh in particular is top secret. Do not do anything foolish.*”

“Me? Let my guard down? Never.”

In the night, Mei’s eyes slowly started to glitter. They looked ferocious, like an animal’s.

“We’re witch-hunting. I want to see what the real monsters—the Founder’s descendants—are like.”

For the first time in history, the Planetary Stronghold, the Nebulis palace, had been raided by the Imperial forces.

3

The Lou Erz mansion.

The door to Aliceliese's room had been left ajar. She must not have had seconds to waste to even close it.

The queen's and Alice's voices had been reproduced, sounding strangely composed.

That was just a few minutes ago.

"Alice, listen closely."

"The palace is under attack. It's in flames."

"It reminds me of the Imperial force's bombardments. In all likelihood, it is."

The video stopped there.

Not on its own. The girl casting the spell had been too shocked to focus, interrupting her astral power.

"...The...Imperial forces...?" Sisbell's voice was hoarse.

She lost the ability to even support herself and crumpled to her knees on the spot.

"But..."

"W-wait a second?! I can't believe this!" shouted Commander Mismis. "We didn't know anything. I'm being honest here! I mean, we ran into you, Ms. Sisbell, in an independent state."

"...I never said it was your fault, Commander Mismis." The girl on the carpet weakly lifted her face. "I've been watching you. You haven't received a single message from the Imperial headquarters, even when you were in Alsamira. I'm not doubting you really were on extended leave."

"Th-then..."

“Please remember what my sister Elletear told us.”

“There was a time when I was close with the Imperial army.”

“As long as you obediently stay in the mansion, your attendant will come back to you.”

In other words...Elletear was implying she wanted Sisbell to bear it as the palace was raided.

That explained why she'd transported Unit 907 to this villa upon reaching the terminal: Unit 907 could have recognized the faces of the Imperial forces that were preparing to raid the central state.

Had they run into any of them, the plan might have come to light.

“Elleteaaaaaar!” The youngest princess's shriek seemed to pierce through the night. “I...I don't understand what you're thinking! Are you trying to betray our motherland?! Why—?”

A gunshot fired.

They heard something whiz outside the walls.

“Huh?” Sisbell turned to the window in tears. She was inexperienced in battle, unfamiliar with the sound.

“Get down.”

“Ah?! ...Wh-what do you think you're doing?!”

The youngest princess protested as Jhin forced her to duck.

“Don't go near the windows. You raise your head, and it'll be riddled with holes. Keep down until you get out of the room and escape through the hallway.”

“B-but what is going on?!”

“I heard an electrical sound with that gunshot. It's an assault rifle, TH76...or an 87.” Nene leaned against the living room wall. Her expression looked grave as she peered out toward the balcony. “Meaning it's an Imperial gun.”

“What?!”

“They’re casing this mansion. It wasn’t just the palace.”

“Th-this is no joke! Our servants are unarmed. Just how sick are the Imperial forces if they’re willing to attack civilians?!”

“Shut up and run. Boss.” Jhin shoved Sisbell toward Commander Mismis, who took her hand and tugged her out to the hallway.

Thunk.

They heard something *landing* on the third-floor balcony.

“They’re coming around from the rear garden, Iska.”

“Got it!” Iska unsheathed his black astral sword, charging himself up.

The sword flashed. The curtain was in shreds...and dropped to the ground.

Beyond the glass wall, they could make out the forms of Imperial elites crawling up the balcony, taking cover in the dark of night.

...Those are the battle uniforms from Special Defense Third Division.

...These are our colleagues. This is the worst thing that could happen!

They couldn’t fight against them.

“Eek!” shrieked Sisbell.

The muzzles of the guns aimed at her.

Before the Imperial soldiers could shoot, Iska launched himself at the glass wall.

“Hragh!” He swiped his swords twice.

They smashed the glass in front of the Imperial unit’s eyes. It wasn’t a clean cut on purpose; he purposefully hit the glass with the flat side of his sword to shatter it.

Glass came raining down on the three soldiers on the balcony.

“Wait! We’re part of the Imperial forces! We’re Unit 907 from the Third Division! We were captured on a trip in the independent state of Alsamira!” Iska yelled at the Imperial soldiers in night-vision goggles.

Please stop. He thrust his hands in front of him, hoping they would quit

attacking.

“We can list out Imperial resident codes. You can check right now—”

“Out of the way, Iska!”

Had the silver-haired sniper not yelled at him...Iska would have been assailed by gunfire unleashed by the soldiers.

“These guys *aren’t from the Imperial military!*”

Their muzzles were pointed at Iska.

The members of Special Defense Third Division were pointing their guns at one of their own men.

A second round of gunshots was fired.

Crumpling to the ground with a shriek were the three Imperial soldiers, each shot in the shoulder. Jhin had gotten two of them. Nene had gotten the final one from behind. In seconds, they leaped over to kick the three soldiers in the jaw until they were unconscious.

“...D-did you save us?” Sisbell whispered, finally breathing again. She looked down at the three soldiers, trembling. “...It seems they don’t even show mercy to their own men.”

“Didn’t you hear me? These guys aren’t Imperial soldiers. They just look the part.”

“Huh?”

“Assault rifles like TH87 are standard for the Imperial troops, but the trick to shooting them is to lower their center of gravity toward the muzzle. That way, the astral corps can’t use them in the battlefield, even if they’re taken from us.”

“...Does a single gun have that many tricks?”

“And they didn’t *know* that.” Jhin stomped on the torsos of the soldiers.

Since he was the most familiar with guns out of everyone in Unit 907, Jhin had noticed that abnormality the fastest.

“You can tell from the way they’re holding these. They’ve never shot one before.”

“B-but their uniforms...?!”

“Just good fakes, or they were recovered off a battlefield. Same goes for the guns. Hey, Iska.”

“I know.” He pulled off one of the soldiers’ night-vision goggles. Iska took a good look at the middle-aged man with close-cropped hair.

He didn’t recognize the man.

There were many soldiers in the Third Division; it wasn’t as though they knew everyone.

“Iska, Jhin!” Nene had yanked the goggles off another of the soldiers and pointed at his cheek.

There was an astral crest that looked like a tattoo.

“That settles it. These guys aren’t part of an Imperial unit, little miss employer. They’re part of the astral corps. You recognize them?”

“...I don’t. I don’t think they’re even associated with the corps.”

“You better not be playing dumb.”

“I-it’s true! I feel no obligation toward rogues trying to kill me. I can affirm they aren’t members of the palace.”

If the princess didn’t recognize these assassins, they probably didn’t belong to the House of Lou. In which case, it had to be someone else who sent them here.

...But there’s something off about this situation.

...Alice heard from the queen that the Imperial forces invaded the palace.

It was different here.

These “Imperial troops” were the astral corps in disguise.

“Sisbell, do you think it’s likely that these guys are attacking the palace?”

“...I think the ones attacking the palace are real.” Her face was pale as she looked down at the collapsed assassins. “The queen guessed they were Imperial forces. She was on her fair share of battlefields when she was younger, so I think she would immediately see through any fakes.”

“So they’ve got real soldiers there, and we’ve got fake ones here? What’s going on?” Jhin asked.

Their next steps were obvious. They were grateful that this place had been cased by non-Imperial fighters.

“I hear gunshots coming from the first floor!” yelled Commander Mismis from her post down the hall. “They’re already inside!”

“Works in our favor. We can restrain them and make them spit out their leader. Iska.”

“Got it.” Iska jumped out into the hall along with Jhin, who shouldered his sniper rifle.

Footsteps thudded. They were coming close. Iska sensed them turning the corner, and he hurled himself at those people.

“Guh?!”

“Too slow.”

Before they could clumsily ready their Imperial guns, he kicked one of the fake soldiers from the chest, knocking him down. With that momentum, Iska questioned the other two.

“What happened to your *astral powers*?”

“You little...!”

They were both frazzled that their identities had been uncovered and indignant from the Imperial swordsman’s provocation.

An astral corps member who had let go of his gun thrust out both his hands.

...That’s right. That’s what I need.

...You’ve exposed yourselves as astral mages.

As long as they had Sisbell’s astral power, she could reproduce everything that happened in this battle and use that as evidence that these were not Imperial soldiers.

“That’s more than enough.”

A bullet whizzed by Iska's cheek.

The gunshots from behind shook the corridor. The astral mage, who had been shot in both arms, folded over himself. Iska had backup. Jhin and Nene had fired those shots.

"Sisbell, where are the servants?!"

"The gunshots will wake them up. Their rooms are toward the back of the residence, so they'll be safe for a while."

"In that case, we're plowing ahead to the front entrance now. You stay behind us, Sisbell. Nene, Commander, we're counting on you to protect us from behind!"

The hall facing the front door was connected to all the mansion's corridors. If they could secure that location, they could obstruct the enemy's invasion.

"Sounds like the footsteps have stopped. Have they switched over to launching an ambush?" Jhin asked as he ran down the hall. "If they resort to long-range shots, I'll intercept them. If they try using astral powers at midrange, it's on you, Iska."

"Got it."

There was a light coming from around the corner.

The entrance hall was illuminated, even after lights out. That meant there had to be someone there.

It was up to Iska to cut them down.

He launched himself off the ground and headed to the front hall of the second floor. He doubted his eyes when he saw the scene before him.

"The soldiers!" He looked down at the first-floor hall.

The lights were pouring down on assassins dressed as Imperial troops, all on the ground and with their guns out of reach.

There were seven in total. All of them had been incapacitated, unable to move in the slightest.

The only one standing in the hall was a middle-aged man smartly dressed in a

white suit.

“Hello, Sisbell. That was very close.”

He was a burly man with dignified features, like a movie star. He had a mild-mannered, gentlemanly vibe.

“I’m the head of the Hydra, Talisman. I’m here on a direct order from the queen to rescue you. Sisbell, are you safe?”

“Lord Talisman?!” shouted Sisbell from the second-floor landing.

“You haven’t been hurt, have you? The queen was very worried.” As Talisman looked up at the princess, he broke into a cool smile. “But you’re safe now. There is a disaster going on in the palace, but I will protect you.”

“...You mean the one launched by the Imperial forces.”

“That’s right. Seeing that the Imperial units are after the palace, they must be after the queen and her close associates. You’re one of the targets, according to the queen.”

“The queen said that?”

“Yes. We must hurry. I’ve defeated the assassins here, but we cannot be certain if there are more on the way. Come on. Let’s get in my car.”

“Uh.” Sisbell’s shoulders started to convulse as she stood on the landing.

She was looking fearfully at her left wrist...which the silver-haired sniper had grabbed to silently tell her *not to go*.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you Sisbell’s guards?”

“We’re just doing our job. This’ll be over in twenty seconds. I want to say two things to you.”

Jhin had Sisbell retreat to Iska’s side. Jhin stepped forward to the front line of the landing.

“If you’re the head of the Hydra, how do you explain Vichyssoise attacking us in the eighth state?”

“That was already settled with the inquisition with the queen. We have no way of knowing why, and even I have a difficult time believing the firsthand

accounts of her transformation.”

“All right. Second question,” Jhin said.

“Ask away. We’re in a hurry, but I will answer any questions to prove my innocence.”

“You idiot.” Jhin’s lip curled up as he snarled.

He aimed the muzzle of his sniper rifle at the man downstairs.

“There were *two* people behind the coup. That was Elletear and you—*the one who invited the Imperial forces here.*”

That wasn’t a question.

It was a declaration of war against a sorcerer related to the Founder.

“...Huh?! W-wait, Jhin, what are you doing?”

“*Shut up and listen.*”

Sisbell went silent. She realized Jhin was telling her to hear him out.

“Right now, the palace is being attacked by real Imperial forces. So why send us astral mages pretending to be one of us? Why is it that Vichyssoise showed herself while these mages are in costumes? Aren’t they both trying to overthrow the country?”

“...”

“No one would question it because the timing was immaculate. Witnesses wouldn’t question whether these soldiers in Imperial uniforms were fake. They’d probably testify that they saw *Sisbell being kidnapped from the mansion by Imperial units.*”

What would happen then?

It would make Unit 907 out to be the perpetrators. Not a single person would assume the House of Hydra was behind this entire scheme.

“Now we know the culprits who planned the coup *also* arranged the Imperial raid. In fact, no one but the queen’s assassin would be so hell-bent on capturing Sisbell. After all, once this little girl gets back to the palace, it’ll be all over for the suspect.”

“Stop right there. There has been a terrible misunderstanding.”

The man did not move a single step. He calmly raised his hands to show them he had no animosity toward them whatsoever.

“I can explain myself, but I have a question for you: Couldn’t you apply your theory to the other family? Ours has not put up the most resistance to the reign of the current queen.”

“You’re saying you want to point the blame toward the Zoa? There’s no way. Lord Mask hasn’t got anything to do with this whole feud. He’s completely in the clear.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“‘Cause we saw him at Alsamira. Based on your reaction, you’ve got no clue what he was blurting out.”

“I do not care about her reasons. That girl tried to deceive us.”

“She tried to bring in an Imperial-soldier pawn from outside the game.”

Lord Mask On had been enraged.

After all, Princess Sisbell had been tied to Imperial soldiers. He wouldn’t allow her to have a word of explanation, declaring it to be a crime.

“Seems like the Zoa are ultimate extremists,” Jhin admitted. “They despise the Empire and are just itching to bring the entire country down. That’s why there’s no way they’d be part of a scheme that involved calling in the Imperial forces.”

“That’s only a theory, however. What if the Zoa were simply pretending to hate the Empire?”

“There’s no way,” Jhin refuted with a snort. “If Lord Mask was working with the Empire, this whole thing would have ended in Alsamira. He would have bought us out on the spot, then dealt with Sisbell, and this would’ve been over. He never would have needed to go to the trouble of attacking this villa.”

“ ... ”

“Also, Lord Mask wanted to take this girl back to the palace. He was going to

drag her there to interrogate her for colluding with Imperial soldiers.”

“We came here to retrieve our kindred. We have no desire to play with fire in Alsamira.”

“Why would an Imperial soldier protect a mage?”

The Zoa had been trying to escort Sisbell to the palace. That fundamentally contradicted the move to isolate her in this mansion.

“They might have extreme ideas, but the Zoa have no ties to the coup. That means there’s only one group of descendants left. Now that it’s been revealed that mages cased this mansion, you can no longer claim that Vichyssoise acted on her own. It had to have been a huge plot that involved the whole family.”

“...” The head of the Hydra made no attempt to reply.

On the other hand, Iska and Sisbell had been listening to Jhin.

...That’s right. They dressed up as Imperial forces to pin the assault on the princess on us.

...But that let him figure out who was really behind this. No one can match you, Jhin.

Jhin had memorized every single one of Lord Mask’s words.

Otherwise, they never would have been able to spot the inconsistencies of this attack. They wouldn’t have concluded that this man was very dangerous.

“Got that? You’re the ones behind the revolution.”

Light applause echoed through the mansion’s hall. “Great deduction skills. I see. Your meeting with Lord Mask is a hard blow to us. It seems the fate of the stars has thrown a wrench in our plans.”

The unit could sense people stirring. The seven armed men dressed as Imperial troops rose to their feet.

“Let’s finish this quietly. The only things that will remain in this place will be Imperial gunpowder and bullet holes. After that, the servants will assume that the Imperial unit was behind it.”

“Lord Talisman?! Was it really you...?!”

“This was necessary. *We require the Empire’s power to reach the planet’s core.* Our goal will never be reached under the rule of the current queen.”

The head of the Hydra started to smile at the girl. His tone remained gentlemanly.

“Let’s join hands, Sisbell. The astral power in you can reveal the secrets of this planet. I would like you to work for me in the future.”

“...What?! Do you even hear yourself?!”

“Your guards are a separate matter. Things fall flat if too many actors join the stage.”

Seven assault rifles were pointed at the unit.

“So I hope you will make your exit here.”

“Now, boss,” Jhin instructed.

The walls roared from the blast of a timed explosion, swallowing Talisman and his seven armed soldiers.

“What?”

“Smoke?! This is not good. We can’t capture the enemies upstairs!”

The soldiers retreated to avoid the blast. They couldn’t even fire their guns as the dust billowed in the hall and limited their visibility to only a few inches ahead of them.

“Why are you so surprised? Those were bombs you brought with you. We might know a thing or two about weapons made in the Empire,” Jhin declared from the landing.

They were bombs that they had stolen from the three armed soldiers who had invaded Alice’s room. Jhin, Iska, and Sisbell had stood somewhere highly visible to distract the head of the Hydra and his men.

Meanwhile, Nene and Commander Mismis had come down a different set of stairs, planting the bombs in the hall.

...There was a reason why Jhin talked so much.

...He was trying to buy time to plant the explosives.

In the smoke, Iska shoved the youngest princess from behind.

“Sisbell, follow Jhin and run!”

“Iska?! Wh-what about you...?”

“I’m in the rear. I’m going to buy time, so you get to the back while I do!”

As the black smoke rose, Iska held his own on the landing.

The shortest path to following Sisbell up to the second floor was this front staircase. He would protect it with his life.

“Go!”

“B-be careful. Lord Talisman’s astral power can manipulate waves—” Sisbell’s voice disappeared.

Below Iska, the base of the stairs connecting to the landing creaked.

“Guh. Are you trying to *blow us up*?!”

There wasn’t a blast, smoke, or fire. The landing itself and the central staircase were pulverized by a crushing force unseen to the eye.

“Humph. So you jumped before I could destroy the stairs. Excellent job.”

Iska landed from the second floor.

Had he been half a second too late, he would have been crushed by the surge of invisible power. Though he hadn’t been injured, sweat trickled down his face.

...He tricked us.

...He got us with the whole charade about only leaving behind “Imperial gunpowder and bullet holes.”

The sorcerer wanted them to think he wouldn’t weaponize his astral energy. But here they were. He had attempted to destroy Iska, mansion and all.

“Are you insane? You’re about to ruin this place.”

“All I need to do is burn the whole thing down using Imperial explosives. Then, it won’t be my problem anymore. Astral energy residue disappears after a few hours. All that will be left will be traces of you.”

The head of the Hydra snapped his fingers. The seven armed guards on

standby beside him scattered, scrambling throughout the mansion.

“You need not concern yourself with this Imperial soldier. Make sure you secure Sisbell.”

The man in the white suit waved his right hand. The fire spouting up the hall’s walls was snuffed, held back by an invisible wave.

The astral power to control unseeable streams, released in invisible surges of mechanical energy. By making them collide with objects, he could manipulate them as he willed.

It was close to supernatural psychokinesis.

“Oh dear. It isn’t in my nature to do something so barbaric.”

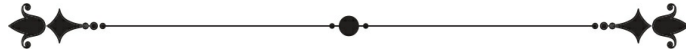
“...Sure doesn’t seem that way.”

“I’m not kidding. I dislike fighting—extremely so.”

Of the bloodlines that were related to the Founder Nebulis, the head of the Hydra was the one who controlled the final bloodline—the Sun.

“But a catharsis is a different matter entirely. I am purifying this planet’s soul.”

CHAPTER 6



Come Dawn

1

The Lou Erz mansion.

In this estate that seemed to sprawl forever, even a fair amount of noise wasn't going to reach the neighboring residents.

Not even blasts nor gunshots. Even if they had heard, the people would have had a hard time determining where they had rung out from in the inky dark of night.

No help would come until dawn.

They had to defeat the assassination units that had invaded the estate, hide in the mansion until morning, or escape.

"We've got three options."

They continued to race down the second-floor hall of the western wing.

Holding Sisbell's hand, Jhin yelled at the commander running up front. "Boss, stop for a sec. Behind that part of the wall that's sticking out."

"O-okay!"

Commander Mismis, Nene, Jhin, and Sisbell pressed themselves against the wall and held their breaths.

There were two reasons why they had stopped: Sisbell was exhausted from running, and it was dangerous to continue forward without a solid plan.

"Those guys climbed up the third-floor balcony right away. Which means there's a high probability that the pursuers have already infiltrated the third

floor. Where's the most dangerous spot, little miss employer?"

"...My room, I'm guessing."

"That's right. The worst thing that could happen is if armed soldiers were waiting for you to run to your own room. So we're not going anywhere near the floor above us."

They had the advantage in this regard.

The unit could hide out in the bathrooms and changing rooms. If it came to guerrilla warfare, it was helpful to have Sisbell on their side, since she knew the mansion like the back of her hand.

"Nene, how many bullets left in your gun?"

"Twelve. I also swiped hand grenades from the soldiers earlier."

"And you, boss?"

"Um, my Taser's battery is about half-full...!"

"Looks like we can't have a war of attrition. If it was just the seven guys from the first floor, we would have been able to manage." Jhin stared down the hall with bated breath.

No one was there. They didn't hear any footsteps or any signs of activity in the hushed hallway. The silence was unnatural, to the point of being eerie.

"_____"

Jhin glanced at the witch, who was squeezing his hand and showed no sign of letting go.

"Quit gripping my hand so hard. It'll make moving difficult when I need to."

"Uhhh?! Wh-what are you trying to say? I-I should have you know, I'm not scared!"

"Fine. Tell me one thing." He narrowed his eyes at a point down the hall as he talked. "How many people are in the House of Hydra? And don't tell me you can't divulge this information because we're an Imperial unit. I need to know what we're up against."

"...There are about thirty people from the Revered Founder's direct line."

“That’s a whole lot less than I expected. Aren’t they part of a bloodline that’s continued for a century?”

“That’s just the direct descendants. There are more than ten times that number of soldiers. And who knows if the House of Hydra have other hidden fighting forces?”

“So a fight head-on is out of the question. We’re outnumbered.”

The unit couldn’t tell how many people had been gathered to the mansion, but it couldn’t have been an insignificant number. After all, the head of household, Talisman, had made the trip himself. That cemented their theory that he intended to leave here with Sisbell.

“...I’m worried for the servants. I know it’s not the time for this, but...,” Sisbell said.

“You heard what that guy said. He needs witnesses to testify the Imperial forces attacked, so they’re not going to rough them up much. We’ve got to worry about ourselves right now.”

Even during the entirety of their hushed conversation, they heard not a single footstep.

The astral corps must have fallen back on their usual battle tactic of setting a trap and waiting for the prey to be captured.

“So what should we do? Do you want to hide and wait it out until morning or escape from this manor? You know any good spots where we could conceal ourselves for the night?”

“...A few places come to mind, but they’re all storehouses or corner spots. There are no means to escape from them, so we wouldn’t be able to run if we were found.”

“Then we’ve got one option. We’ve got to make a getaway out of here.”

Nene and Commander Mismis nodded firmly.

They were on the second floor of the residence. Their choices were to either creep down the stairs or jump from one of the windows.

“Th-there is a path out. I’ll show you!” Sisbell announced, pointing down the

hall.

She started to take a step forward.

“We have escape routes connecting to the outside from the second, third, and fourth floors. We can get away through those.”

“These better not be just normal emergency stairs,” Jhin grumbled.

“They’re secret passages in case of disasters. Even the servants, much less the Hydra, don’t know that these fully concealed passageways are here.”

They tiptoed down the lit hallway in the western-wing on the second floor. It enclosed the courtyard, and it hadn’t been part of the tour when Sisbell had shown them around the place days prior.

“...It’s my first time using it as well.”

She pulled a picture off the wall and stuck her finger into a small crack underneath it. With a demure *thunk*, the adjacent wall started to sink in a little. The indentation was in the shape of a door.

“Whoa. Look! That’s so amazing, Nene. It’s like a trapdoor.”

“Wow. So this wall is hollow, and we can travel behind it by pushing in its thin door. I’ve never seen anything like it in the Empire.”

“This isn’t a field trip. Quit admiring the thing and get in,” barked Jhin.

They headed into the hidden passageway on the other side of the wall.

There wasn’t a single speck of light in there.

The secret corridor reeked of dust and mildew, presumably because no one had set foot in it for a long time. With each breath, the pollutants stung their lungs.

“How’s this an escape route? It’s just a gap between the walls.”

“It’s good enough. If you’re going to be in front, you need to be careful, Jhin. We’re about to hit the stairs. If you’re not careful, you’ll sprain your ankle.”

“I think the fact that it’s pitch black in here is going to pose a bigger issue than some stairs.” He pulled out a communicator, leaving its light on to serve as an impromptu flashlight. “What’s that?”

In the back of the hall, something winked in the darkness.

It wasn't being emitted from a device. It was a fainter, more whimsical kind of light.

It could have come from a firefly, except it was more intense.

Was that astral energy?

"Retreat!" Jhin screamed at the three people behind him, finally piecing it together. "Those guys even knew about this escape route. They've been waiting for us!"

"What?!"

"Get low and run!" Jhin barked. "—Ouch?!"

He felt a sharp pain shooting down his back and involuntarily let out a choked cry. Immediately, he could feel something frigid enveloping him.

As astral energy flooded the corridor with light, they could see that icicles were inching over the walls of the escape route.

"Astral power of ice? So they've abandoned these unwieldy guns to fight in the way they know best..." Jhin observed. "Nene, hurry up. They're planning on encasing this whole passage with ice!"

"I-I know, Jhin!"

They turned tail, tumbling back into the hallway they came from. Sisbell, panting, pounded on the switch on the wall, and the door closed again.

"There's no mechanism to open it from the other side," she assured. "We should be able to give ourselves some time..."

Creak...

The door started to screech as Sisbell tried to catch her breath. Frost crept onto the metal door that was blasted by an arctic chill.

Metal grew brittle in low temperatures...and it didn't take much to pull it from its hinges.

"Original winter, Valley of Blizzards."

The door went flying.

Blasting into the hallway were violent gusts of sleet, not gunpowder. The hallway that they had escaped to iced over, frost settling on their bodies, snow piling high on the ground. It looked like a white winter inside the estate.

“Do you know the different between snow and ice? If you don’t know, allow me to introduce you to the world of snow.”

It was the hoarse voice of an old woman, not an armed soldier, who advanced down the snowy hallway.

She was a slender witch in red clothes that looked like a nun’s habit. Against the pure white backdrop of the hallway, she was the only thing that jumped out.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Sisbell. I think this is the first time we’ve met.”

“...Wh-who are you?!” Sisbell’s words were thorny as the witch bowed reverently in front of her.

This woman had a different demeanor from the armed soldiers on the first floor. It was already strange that she stood confidently in front of three Imperial soldiers, showing no fear of being gunned down.

“Grugell, the Witch of the Midnight Sun,” Jhin identified.

“Hmm? So the Imperial soldier knows me.”

“Only because you dress so gaudily. Those on the Witches’ List are the kind of people you never want to run into.”

Grugell had often been compared to the Ice Calamity Witch. Until both witches had appeared simultaneously in different battlefields, it had been speculated that they were the same person.

She posed that much of a threat.

Even now. Whenever snow started to fall on the battlefield, the Imperial forces were told to retreat immediately, fearing a fight against this witch.

“It’s been so long since I have fought Imperial soldiers.”

“I know that well. They say you completely crushed a whole company from the Fifth Division and put about twenty armored cars out of commission by yourself.”

“Indeed.” The witch laughed merrily. “The world of snow is my domain. You won’t be able to stop a descendant of the Revered Founder such as myself now.”

2

The Lou Erz mansion. First-floor hall.

The embers crackled. Black smoke as thin as threads curled toward the ceiling from the two large holes that opened at the sides of the hall. The fire and smoke had been caused by the bombs set off earlier by Unit 907.

On the other side...dust clouded the air, caused by an invisible force that was even more destructive than the bombs.

“Call it a sixth sense. I felt like something was off.”

There was an indomitable man in the prime of his life strolling through the thick cloud of dust, which would have induced a coughing fit from anyone.

The head of the Hydra, Talisman.

Not a single speck of debris clung to his white suit even among all the floating particulate matter and smoke.

“Vichyssoise was one of our secret weapons. No one in the Lou or Zoa could stop her by themselves. I never would have expected her to make such a blunder.”

“...Are you sure you should be telling me this?”

“I’m asking you a question: Were you the one who overpowered her, former Saint Disciple of the eleventh seat?”

“I don’t care to reply.”

The Saint Disciple of the eleventh seat.

Even as Talisman hinted at Iska's background, Iska had no intention of humoring the man.

...This is the second time now. I'm starting to get it.

...Talking to this guy is dangerous.

Drip, dribbled a red droplet.

Wiping away the blood trailing from the small cut on his forehead, Iska vaulted off the ground. Behind him, a chandelier tumbled from the ceiling, smashing into tiny glass fragments and leaving behind a wreck.

The ceiling had come *crashing down*.

That had happened as Talisman had offered to introduce himself.

"My name is Talisman." As soon as Iska had lent an ear, the man used the opportunity to let hundreds of pounds of metal and wood collapse at once.

...And it wasn't a free fall.

...He accelerated them as quick as artillery fire in silence.

His astral power controlled invisible mechanical energy.

In the past, Iska's master had had a metaphor for what that meant: *"Pretend your enemy has invisible robot arms shooting out of their shoulders."*

Talisman had used his unseeable arms to pulverize the ceiling.

"Hmm. I get it now, after seeing you do that." Talisman put his finger on his chin after folding his arms.

That was the strategy of this astral mage. He prepared for battle as he pretended to be lost in thought.

"I won't fault Vichyssoise's power, but she sorely lacks experience in actual battle. I would find it easy to believe if an experienced Saint Disciple made sport of her, causing her to suffer a devastating blow."

"..."

"That's why I had a bad feeling about this whole thing. I sent an additional assassin just in case, to surveil little Sisbell. He, too, failed."

The sorcerer in the white suit jerked his chin behind him.

The garden was visible from the door, left ajar.

“You were the one who eliminated our intelligence commander Orneik, weren’t you?”

“...Come again?”

“The man with the brushed-up hair and sharp eyes. I ordered him to be on standby in the garden, but we lost communication with him last night. We found him nearly fatally wounded just earlier in the garden.”

Was this conversation another trick to confuse him?

Iska had never heard the name Orneik before or seen anyone of that description—much less an assassin hiding in the residence.

“I don’t plan on saying anything.”

“Well, then just listen. At first, I thought it was little Alice who apprehended him, but she would have interrogated him, instead of leaving him in the garden. It intrigued me that he had been left behind as if the perpetrator had no interest in him anymore.”

“...”

“But that’s water under the bridge. I’ll leave my subordinates to take care of little Sisbell, since I need to hurry back to the palace. On this most important day—”

Talisman jumped back in the middle of his sentence.

Three steps forward. Iska had silently closed in within sword-fighting distance.

The head of the Hydra reacted immediately. “I was still in the middle of our conversation.”

“I could *say the same to you.*”

The floor had split behind Iska. Like spears shooting up from below, sharp shards of the mansion’s bedrock had torn through the plush carpet like paper, ripping into the sky.

They had tried to catch each other by surprise *at the same time.*

Iska had stepped forward to counter, and Talisman had retreated in response. Below the surface of their idle conversation, they were one step ahead, already evading their enemy's trap.

...The head of the Hydra. This man leads one of the Founder's bloodlines.

...He's stronger than I imagined.

Talisman would drone on to distract Iska and strike as soon as his opponent's guard was lowered. Picking up on this pattern, Iska had tried to hurt him when he got too close.

The problem, however, was that this man was observant enough to read into Iska's next move.

...He's trained well.

...He's not just head of the family, but a mage who's built up experience in the battlefield.

On the fourth step forward.

"Hmm. Getting any closer would be dangerous," warned Talisman, backing away.

Iska dropped low to the ground. Just as he was about to pounce at the man and maul him, he sensed the presence of a "wall" and stopped in his tracks.

The dust vanished.

Something had blasted away the particles drifting in the air. An omen of what was to come.

...An enormous tidal wave.

Drawing nearer was an invisible wave. It was like a glass wall weighing dozens of tons was trying to crush the Imperial swordsman like a falling domino.

"Gah?!"

The wave grazed Iska's shoulder, leaving him with shooting pain. He didn't even have a chance to recover as his clothes were ripped off his right shoulder, which had suffered a direct blow.

His clothes weren't just torn—its fibers had disintegrated.

This force was going to *grip him*.

Iska whipped at the empty space with his black astral sword. He couldn't see it, but he could feel the tip of his sword slicing through the wave that had tried to coil around him.

"Hmm. So you got out before it could catch hold of you. You seem to know a fair amount about this type of astral power."

It seemed the head of the Hydra could not be shaken. His reaction seemed to indicate he wasn't surprised by a Saint Disciple hacking through his attack. "You've got some experience under your belt despite your age. I have no doubt you have stood on many a battlefield of carnage."

"Your astral power just isn't that special," Iska spat, glancing at the floor that had been eroded away by the waves.

Focus. He needed to be careful of the space around the man himself, not his mannerisms.

...The astral power of Waves can manipulate surges of energy.

...The most dangerous thing would be if I were directly caught in one of them.

Any attack involving a collapsed ceiling or falling rocks, he could see.

The scariest things were those "invisible robot arms," as Iska's master had called them. If he was grabbed by one, he would be flattened in its palms.

"That doesn't change the way I should deal with you."

"Hmm?" Talisman grunted.

"I just need to close the distance to zero, as fast as possible."

Talisman's eyes went slightly wide.

As soon as the Imperial swordsman kicked off the floor, Talisman aimed a wave directly at the crown of Iska's head. Before the blow could come down and leave a gaping hole in the floor, Iska leaped deftly to the side.

Waves were slower than wind.

The astral power of Wind controlled air, but both were invisible.

Their speed was the differentiating factor. Compared to whirlwinds that approached at the speed of sound, the astral power of Waves was slow and required a close range, though it was strong.

If these two things were triggered at the same time...Iska would be able to leap into range of his opponent sooner than the waves could touch him.

“It’s unusual for an Imperial soldier to not use any guns, but *that...*”

“You’ve got a barrier around you, right?”

The space was empty, but Iska had felt something when he brought down his black astral sword. An eddying wall of waves was obliterated by Iska’s sword.

He couldn’t physically see it, but the Imperial swordsman had managed to perfectly perceive the mass of waves in the air.

“Hmm?” The head of the Hydra narrowed his eyes.

He hadn’t shown any fear when he’d faced the former Saint Disciple, but there was a look of caution now in the sorcerer’s eyes for the first time.

“How did you see them?” the man asked.

“Just a hunch.”

Iska had a *feeling* it was there.

He knew Talisman would lay out a spider’s nest of invisible arms as soon as he determined he couldn’t capture Iska. That sounded easy in theory, but it was impossible for Iska to accurately pinpoint where the invisible waves would be. From that point, he had to rely on his experience, an intuition.

Iska had encountered astral mages who manipulated waves on the battlefield, and the data he’d collected over the years elevated the quality of his guesses—which became his sixth sense.

“Ha-ha. So you’re like a wild beast sniffing out prey.” Talisman put on a forced smile. “I can see why Vichyssoise was defeated. She expected a fight with an Imperial soldier and got a berserker instead. I’m sure she must not have known what to do.”

“_____”

“Saint Disciples are truly dreadful. Don’t you know how annoying it is to have an individual who outpaces a group? Especially in this day and age. After all, you can change the outcome of a battle all on your own.”

There was no point in replying. Before Iska could even get a word in, they had already come to the decisive moment.

“I’ve been *waiting for you*.”

Zwoosh. Something ripped through space.

The floor holding up the head of the Hydra had started to sag. The waves he emitted were causing the floor to ripple.

...And then he seemed to wink out of existence.

Talisman kicked off the floor with enough force that it sounded like a bomb had gone off. The man in the white suit was gone.

That was what it looked like to Iska.

“Surges are wavelengths of mechanical energy on a vector, physical properties born from mass and acceleration. You must know that much.”

Only his voice could be heard.

It didn’t come from behind Iska or either side of him, booming from below. Talisman was close enough that he was in Iska’s blind spot. The sorcerer was coming after him with his head stooped low as though he were sliding across the ground.

He was approaching at such an overwhelming speed that Iska doubted his eyes.

“...Wha—?!”

“You ought to be careful about making sweeping generalizations—even about astral mages that work with Waves.”

The sorcerer’s fist shot up from the ground.

Would Iska intercept this blow with the astral sword? No. He had no way of knowing if this was an ordinary punch. They were so close that their shoulders almost touched.

Iska's spine tinged from the terrifying power the sorcerer emanated and jumped off the ground as high as he could.

He didn't even think about ambushing the man.

All he could do was escape Talisman's range by vaulting away. *Shwik*. The fist grazed his torso, and in that moment, Iska's ribs *detonated*.

"Gah?! Gragh... Ah...?!"

It felt like the side of his stomach had been gouged out. He was starting to lose consciousness.

...Was that gunpowder? But there's no traces of burn marks.

...He caused this blow just by touching me with his fist...?!

It hadn't even been a direct hit.

Grazing the hem of Iska's clothes had been enough for blue bruises to bloom across his side. Talisman's punch had the potential to pulverize Iska's ribs and internal organs.

"So you chose not to meet the blow to escape. You have good intuition, I'll give you that. And I applaud you for dodging my blow under these conditions."

The head of the Hydra adjusted the hem of his white suit.

"Talisman the Tyrant, they call me. I find that nickname to be a far cry from my true nature, however."

"...It suits you...perfectly..." Iska spat out the saliva that had pooled in his mouth.

It was tinged red, either from his cut lip, internal injuries, or both.

...Waves are mechanical energy created from the astral power on this planet.

...Does that mean his explosive speed was activated by converting its energy into mass and acceleration?

Could it be used in that way? Iska had never seen it before—not even on the battlefield.

"So if that's your astral power..."

“Hmm?” Talisman said. “Don’t tell me you’ve mistakenly assumed that I’m unique or something.”

“...What?”

“So I converted Wave energy into acceleration. Any astral mage of the same type can pull that off. I guess the only difference is that I’m very powerful.”

“Anyone can do it? Don’t lie to me—”

“With a little training, that is.” Talisman’s form blurred.

He launched himself from the floor, which echoed like a gunshot, and the sorcerer came crashing down, aiming for the top of Iska’s head. Before Talisman could land, Iska was able to catch sight of the man stooping over for a fraction of a second.

Iska couldn’t perceive the man moving *after that*.

...I knew it. His initial velocity isn’t that fast.

...But then he accelerates like crazy. He’s using his astral power to induce surges and make himself go faster!

Until the man jumped or started running, Talisman was as fast as a normal person. But then, he would pick up speed by the waves pushing him from behind. It was as if the man was running with a tailwind.

“The physical conversion of the waves. It took me six years of fine-tuning to understand it. And eight more years to learn how to use it. Another thirteen years to reach this point. Nearly thirty years of hard work. I might be a little ham-handed.”

The man’s fist brushed up against Iska’s bangs.

Iska dove to the side. It felt like a hammer had been driven into his skull.

“Anyone has the potential to do it, but you’d need to be mad to reach this level of perfection. Do you get it, young Saint Disciple? Do you see what I am trying to say?”

Iska lunged toward the center of the hall to dodge the sorcerer’s attacks. The descendant of the Founder, however, tried to block his path.

Iska's first steps were faster...but the man moved at explosive speed, activating his converted astral energy.

"No way!"

Iska had been overtaken.

Never in his life had he experienced such shock before, even though he'd gone up against every kind of astral mage there was.

"You and I are *one and the same*. We're *demons at the peak of power*," snarled the man.

Talisman would not even let him dodge.

As a fist drove into Iska's ribs, his consciousness started to dim from the sheer force of the Wave. A second later, Iska's body smashed into a stone pillar.

It ended with a dull thud.

"Unfortunately for you, I've been doing this for longer. See the difference for yourself."

Talisman tore his gaze away from the bowed soldier. He adjusted the hem of his white suit—still pristine—and checked for wrinkles before turning around in satisfaction.

"...Wait...ugh..."

"*What?*" Talisman stopped.

The tyrant scowled and looked down to find Iska, panting and balancing his weight on his sword to prop himself up on his feet.

"That Wave could pulverize steel. I thought I landed a direct hit."

"You did."

"Thought so. So how are you able to get back up?"

It should have reduced Iska's insides to a pulp.

Talisman had assumed the soldier's abdominal muscles had been shredded, ribs and spine grinded into dust, internal organs pierced...

...And that almost became reality.

...If I hadn't released my astral attack then, I would have been done for.

The white sword could release an astral attack just once. Iska had unleashed the waves that the black astral sword had broken earlier to serve as his shield.

"Beautiful," gasped the head of the Hydra, praising Iska in a way that was both snooty and honest. "You've really worked on your skills—your perception, movements, grit. Just facing you makes shivers creep up my spine. You're starting to scare me."

"..."

The pot calling the kettle black, Iska snapped in his mind. He wiped his lips, tasting blood.

...Talisman, the head of the Hydra.

...So this is one of the purebreds who leads one of the Nebulis bloodlines...!

Iska could sense that this purebred was a force to be reckoned with, even if he didn't want to.

Vichyssoise might have inflicted more widespread damage, but the man in front of him had an intensity that no other astral mage had.

This man was the natural enemy of Iska—the Successor of the Black Steel.

Iska's method of battling astral power of overwhelming strength was to engage in super-close combat at the risk of his life. He would slip past the attack and sneak within reach of his opponent before they could see what was going on.

This was all feasible because Iska had fast legs and always worked on his fighting techniques.

...I'm annoyed. I've never been so frustrated before.

...I can't believe someone can shake off my maneuvers.

They were equal in speed.

Iska's fangs had ripped through many a formidable foe: the Founder, the Ice Calamity Witch, the Witch of Thorns, the transcendental sorcerer. This was his first time encountering an enemy that was untouchable.

“Now, what could you possibly be thinking? Perhaps a way to turn things around on me? An escape route? Or little Sisbell’s status after she ran deeper into the estate?”

“I’ll answer the last question. You’re completely off base with that one.”

He sliced through the empty space with his sword.

All the visible dust went flying in all directions. “She’s with my buddies,” Iska spat.

“My hand-selected subordinates have the mansion surrounded, you know?”

“They’ll escape right away. You’ll see.”

“Ha-ha,” the leader of a bloodline burst out. “Sorry for laughing. You just seemed so serious. Escape to where? You can’t go beyond the estate.”

“...And why is that?”

“There’s no place in the Sovereignty for her to run away to anymore. The administration is on its way to collapse right this very moment. Via the Imperial raid, that is.”

“Like I care. We’re going to bring her to the capital.”

Then that would be the end of it. Mayhem breaking out in the Sovereignty did not concern Iska. Even if Queen Nebulis IIX were to fall, even if Sisbell cried and begged for his help, he didn’t intend on lending her a hand.

That said...he would get her to the palace—no matter what obstacles stood in his path.

“This is an excellent stage. This residence is on high ground, so I’m certain we’ll be able to see a beautiful sunrise.”

Talisman looked in the direction where the sun would rise, though the sky was jet black. It was one o’clock in the morning. It would be a while until it was dawn.

“Don’t you think you’re jumping ahead?” Iska asked. “It’s still the middle of the night.”

“That’s why we’ll see it through. Tonight will be the last day that the Lou—the

Stars—will twinkle in the sky. And the long night will finally come to an end.”

The stars were a symbol of the Lou.

Just as the stars, moon, and sun took turns illuminating the surface of the world, the Lou, Zoa, and Hydra rotated in and out of prosperity.

Iska remembered hearing something similar from the youngest princess.

“So you’re saying the current queen will fall?”

“Ha-ha. As the head of a family, I cannot say, but you’re a perceptive one.”

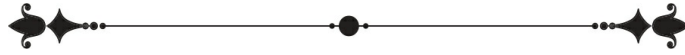
“Then what will happen?”

“That’s obvious. Morning comes once the stars stop twinkling in the night sky,” stated the leader of the Hydra.

He looked up into the deep black of the night.

“Dawn comes with the Hydra Sun. A new era is about to begin.”

EPILOGUE 1



Recite the Nebulis Song, Losing Princess

1

The car ride from the family villa to the palace took around two hours.

Those two hours trapped in a car had never felt so long to Alice.

“Any word from the Queen, Lady Alice?!”

“No. Her device hasn’t run out of power, but it doesn’t seem like she’s in a state where she can talk.”

Alice couldn’t get in direct contact with the queen. Her mother must have had her hands so full that she didn’t have any time to call her own daughter.

“Hurry, Rin. Go three hundred miles per hour.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Pushing forty is all I can manage in the dark!”

Lights beaming ahead, Cadillac One screeched down the road.

Alarms blared. It was past one o’clock in the morning, and the shrill sirens shrieking in the inner city had to be coming from the military-police headquarters.

...I’ve prepared myself.

...These sirens tell me that we’re in a dreadful state of affairs.

It wasn’t the same as warning bells ringing in Alcatroz or Liesbaden.

This was the inner city of the central state.

They had the highest security in place, and the palace had a separate force of select mages with a twenty-four-hour patrolling system. Alice couldn’t

remember a time when the alarms had gone off in this place.

“There aren’t any police officers on the roads,” Alice observed.

“I imagine they’re heading to the palace. Civilians won’t step foot outside when the alarms are going off. It’ll be more important to protect the palace than patrol the urban areas.”

“...Rin.”

How many times had they repeated this conversation? It must have already been four or five times in these last two hours.

“If the Imperial forces have invaded, how much damage do you think there will be?”

“Not much,” the attendant asserted as she gripped the steering wheel.

Rin wasn’t putting on a brave face for Alice’s sake. Her tone made it clear that she meant what she said.

“I imagine there is little damage to civilian homes and buildings outside the palace. More like the troops won’t be able to cause major harm.”

“...”

“After all, they must be operating in a team of a few dozen men. If the Imperial forces disguised themselves as normal people and tried to cross the border with a surplus of firearms, they would be caught in the baggage inspection at the border. They might be able to manage pistols and disassembled assault rifles. Neither of those can cause major casualties.”

“...You’re right.”

They wouldn’t be bringing in weapons of mass destruction, like missiles used to suppress the battlefield. That was impossible.

Simple weaponry would prove no match for the astral corps. Even if the Imperial troops launched a surprise attack, the mages would curb the damage to the bare minimum.

“But that doesn’t apply to Imperial soldiers who don’t use guns,” Rin clarified.

“...You mean like Iska?”

“No, I don’t mean swords. Some of them have silent killing techniques that make use of knives and a person’s bare hands. I believe that is the favorite method of a certain assassin—Saint Disciple Nameless.”

“There is no uncertainty in my mind that he’s there. He would never pass up on an invasion.”

Nameless was an enemy. Alice couldn’t say they hadn’t crossed paths before.

If he was able to take them by surprise, even a descendant of the Founder would not come out unscathed.

“But I don’t think there are many masters of his techniques,” Alice said, hopeful.

“One is enough. After all, the enemy will be after the queen.”

There was something bitter in Rin’s tone.

“There might not be much damage done to the Sovereignty as a whole, but the royal family is a separate matter. Even if no citizens are injured, the entire country would collapse if the queen were to fall,” Rin explained.

“...You’re right.”

With this Imperial raid, the people’s faith in the Lou would drop. If the queen fell now, the royal family would have a near impossible time recovering from the upset.

“Lady Alice, we’re leaving the city.”

They were passing through the urban area, which was densely packed with houses for the affluent and commercial buildings. Their field of vision opened suddenly, and the roadway doubled in size. They were on public land now. They could see the military-police headquarters on the sprawling grounds.

“From here on, I’ll go sixty miles per hour. Lady Alice, please fasten your seat belt.”

“You can go double that as far as I’m concerned. Hurry, Rin.”

On the horizon ahead, the four spires seemed to pierce the heavens, standing stark against the crimson skies.

A sunset this late at night? Alice wondered to herself, taking in the red color saturating the Nebulis palace.

“No!” Rin was the one who let out a hoarse breath. “It can’t be! This is impossible. How many weapons did the Imperial forces manage to sneak in?!”

“...You’re kidding...”

Fire. Alice pressed a hand on the window of Cadillac One. She forgot to even blink, eyes boring into the devastation before her.

The palace was engulfed in flames.

Scarlet embers fanned through the air. Moon Diadem, the midair corridor that connected the Queen’s Shrine with the Moon Spire, came crashing down with a deafening groan.

“_____”

Words couldn’t come to her.

Until Alice had seen it with her own eyes, there had been a hint of hope in her heart.

The palace had the best astral mages in wait, and in its vicinity were the descendants of the Founder, including the queen and the Houses of the Zoa and Hydra.

She didn’t need to fear that the palace would be invaded.

But that had been...a wish that would go ungranted, Alice realized.

2

Nebulis Sovereignty. Star Spire.

Screams and shouted arguments flooded the Lou grounds.

Detonations were going off everywhere. The Imperial units in hiding launched surprise attacks on the corps members who were here to extinguish the fires that raged near the palace.

Small fights were breaking out among them.

The whole time, blistering flames ate away the courtyard lawn.

“I knew the fuel tanks in isolated storage would be their initial target. Even the palace’s best mages would have a hard time extinguishing large fires... I’m just happy that everything went to plan and they successfully mounted the attack.”

“Lady Elletear! Lady Elletear!”

“They don’t have to be violent. They just have to protect the flames from the firefighting crews. With time, the flames will spread and become a bigger threat than the Imperial forces themselves.”

“Lady Elletear! Please open the door! The Imperial forces have launched a surprise attack on us. You must take refuge—”

Elletear leaned against the window of her room. She smiled faintly as she watched the tumult below her.

“And then there is Lord Talisman. I wonder if he has captured Sisbell.”

“Lady Elletear! The Imperial forces have gotten their hands on fuel. The flames are coming from the parking area on the grounds!”

Someone shouted at her from beyond the door.

Banging on the door was a retainer getting more desperate by the minute. Someone who was a close associate even among the aides. Someone who had served the family for a long time and trusted the current queen.

“Minister Wols.”

“L-Lady Elletear! Hurry! This way!”

“You need not worry.”

“...What?”

“You should take refuge ahead of me. The enemy is after the Queen’s Palace, so don’t go near it. We don’t need civilians to get hurt.”

“...And you, L-Lady Elletear...?”

“I’ll go later.”

After she saw the raid for herself.

How would the minister have reacted if Elletear had said that?

“I wonder if the Saint Disciples have reached the Queen’s Palace yet. I would hate for too many people to get hurt. That’s not my style. But it *would* make me happy if they could finish off the queen quickly.”

Elletear stroked her finger on her chin, thinking.

“I need to get ready soon.”

She knew no one would understand her true intentions...that this was her way of “purifying” the Sovereignty.

“Lady Alice’s astral powers are already so great. She is certainly fit for the next queen!”

“Lady Sisbell has the omniscient power to see through all. We need wisdom, not military power. She is queen material.”

“Shh. The eldest princess is coming. We can’t let her overhear this conversation.”

“...Alice. Sisbell. Mother.”

Elletear planted her hand on the window frame and looked over the domain, thinking about her beloved family. She cared about them. Even now, her love for them was genuine.

That said, she had always been the black sheep.

“All the retainers fawned after you for your natural-born astral powers. You could never understand my feelings, as I watched you all from behind.”

Elletear had observed her sisters as they were celebrated for their astral powers.

She had endured the humiliation.

When she’d hear the retainers gossiping about her, she’d scramble into her room, holding back tears. She would dive into her bed, where she would weep, inconsolable.

Why?

Why had she been the only one born with such a pathetic astral power?

Even her own mother could never empathize with her.

The queen was like the others. Those blessed with potent powers could never understand what it felt like to be born a loser.

“Did you think you had no supporters in the palace, Sisbell? You were wrong. I really had no one in here.”

She had no promise of becoming the queen and no one who followed her with all their heart. Elletear had always been alone. It was she who had been branded a loser at birth.

She had worked harder than anyone else—in etiquette, education, and intellect. She was desperate to achieve anything possible through effort. Even that didn’t change her fate. She could never become queen.

Her astral power was too useless.

And that single factor made Elletear a failure.

“Alice, Sisbell, Mother... You must have thought this country would never collapse under your rule. But you were gravely mistaken.”

Oh, overconfident bloodline of the Founder...

Behind the shadows of their constant glorification of the Sovereignty as the paradise for *all* astral mages, there were losers like the eldest princess, pushed aside by the royal family.

Think of the anguish. The grief. All the bitter tears.

They would come to see the strength of a true witch who overcame total despair.

“Your misfortunes were your potent powers. Those won’t change anything or bring forth a new era.”

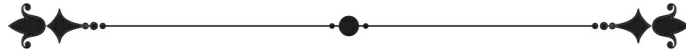
There was no paradise for astral mages in the Nebulis Sovereignty.

It was a dream within a dream.

An ephemeral fantasy of what utopia looked like.

“Tonight, the palace will go under in flames. I’m fine being the witch who lights these fires...if it’s necessary for heading toward true paradise.”

EPILOGUE 2



The Final Night of Witches' Paradise

1

The Planetary Stronghold.

The Nebulis palace constituted of the Star, Moon, and Solar Spires and the Queen's Palace, which governed all three of them.

Their target was the Queen's Palace.

Flames were still roaring within the palace grounds. Fights had broken out between the astral corps members who had gathered to extinguish the fire and the Imperial units who were trying to keep it alive.

"What is this? Magic? Or astral power? How's that thing held up?"

The corridor suspended in midair. Moon Diadem.

The floating glass passage connected the Queen's Shrine to the Moon Spire. Its ceiling and floor were made entirely of glass, making the flames roaring outside visible below it.

"So this is the Planetary Stronghold, huh? 'Cause it's made using astral energy, there's oodles of hidden tricks and rare materials in this thing. It seems like it'll take forever to get to the Queen's Palace, huh?"

The Saint Disciple of the third seat, the Incessant Tempest, Mei.

The woman in a battle uniform was strolling as if on a walk.

"Ma'am, the front entrance of the Queen's Palace has been closed. Our guns have not worked on it."

"I know that, Commanderino. That's the whole reason we're taking this

detour.” Mei turned to her direct reports, grinning in a way that showed her sharp canines.

She had four subordinates, all commanders who Mei had hand selected.

“The closed door indicates that she can’t handle the raid. It’s safe to assume that they do not have traps or tools to use against invaders in here.”

“Exactly. We sneak in there and victory is as good as—hmm?”

The Saint Disciple raised her head...and stopped.

Her eyes scoured the corridor, but she couldn’t see anyone down the path—nothing but sixty-five feet of air blowing outside the glass walls. No one was out there.

“Hmm...that’s how it is.”

“Ma’am?”

“Oh, Commanderino. It’s dangerous over there.” Mei was pointing at the glass ceiling.

Part of the wall had been *erased*. A perfectly circular hole was there like a cork had been removed from the glass. That oddity did not escape Mei, who had almost inhuman vision.

A teeny needle.

Like the purple thorn on a sea urchin. As soon as it had pricked the glass, the glass had winked out of existence.

“Erasing objects, huh? It must be a time-space type, if it can manipulate space. I can tell you’re going to be a wicked one. Nice to meet you, little girl,” Mei called out.

Crunch...

Bursting through the glass was a girl, *flying down from the sky* to stand in the passageway and crushing shards of glass under her feet. She seemed like she was trying to block them from advancing.

“I was waiting for you, Imperial soldiers.”

A witch with ties over her eyes.

The girl had to be either thirteen or fourteen. Her black hair was glossy, and her dress, extravagant. Her cute little bow made her seem like a doll.

“I am Kissing Zoa Nebulis IX.”

“A purebred?!”

“So one of them has finally come out...!”

Four Imperial soldiers pointed the muzzles of their guns at her.

They seemed petrified, which was a natural response. The commanders had narrowly avoided death on countless battlefields, which was exactly why they understood to their very core that a purebred was a dangerous monster indeed.

“Ma’am!”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sure you can tell. Does she look like she’s in the astral corps? Her outfit marks that she’s one of the Founder’s descendants.”

The young witch was from the bloodline of the Founder Nebulis.

Ever since they stepped foot in the palace, the soldiers had been wondering when one would come out.

“Looks like you’re our *first* one. You all take things slow. I thought you’d come sooner.”

“I was asleep,” admitted the girl.

“Bwah-hah?! Ah-ha-ha-ha. Of course. Of course! It’s past your bedtime, isn’t it? You got me there.”

“Yes, so I would like you to go. I haven’t had enough sleep yet.”

Zwoosh. Something in the air felt different.

As Mei burst into laughter, a suspicious light started to burn bright.

“My grandfather gave me orders. He said I can destroy the palace as long as I get rid of all the Imperial soldiers.”

The black-haired girl ripped off the tie around her eyes.

Her violet irises gleamed like amethyst and gave the Imperial soldiers a once-over.

“I will commence the elimination.”

“How about I teach you why I’m called the Incessant Tempest?”

Queen’s Palace. The hanging garden.

Retainers and attendants would hang around this space to catch their breath in the afternoon. Daily tea parties were put on, surrounded by the smell of blooming flowers.

“Look at the scene before you.”

Echoing in the midnight garden was the voice of a man who spoke as clearly as an actor.

“The fanned flames are like oversized flowers blooming in the night. Beautiful, but cruel and evanescent. They’ll be gone by morning.”

Two people had made a visit to the garden.

The speaker was a man in a mask sporting a black suit.

The one listening to him was a tall, bespectacled Imperial soldier.

“It’s unfortunate. I’m filled with regret.”

“Ah...sorry,” she replied. “Are you disappointed that a common Imperial soldier was the only one to come here?”

“I was planning to make hundreds of these searing red flowers bloom in the Imperial capital. It seems you’ve beat me to it. That’s what I regret.”

“Oh, we’re of the same mind.”

From beyond her lenses...the Saint Disciple stared at him with her clever eyes, lips curling up.

“So what should we do? Don’t you think it’s difficult to carry on a conversation without knowing each other’s names?”

“Oh, pardon me.” The masked man shrugged as if it had slipped his mind. “Where are my manners? My name is On, though everyone calls me Lord Mask. You may call me anything you like.”

“Nice to meet ya. I’m Risya.”

“The Saint Disciple?”

“Oh... Busted.” Risya stuck out her tongue and smiled bashfully.

The Imperial soldier behind the raid was clearly provoking him, but he smiled genially as though he was tickled by it and shrugged it off.

They had gotten a read on each other...and realized that the person on the other side was someone who possessed the same type of skills.

“Madame Saint Disciple, our head of household has some words he wishes to give you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s a message from the head of the Zoa house, Lord Growley. First—”

“First, allow me to thank you. The planet has beckoned our destined guests.”

Nebulis Sovereignty. Moon Spire.

The third-floor banquet hall was illuminated by a gigantic light that looked like the full moon. In the center of the animated crowd was an elderly man in a wheelchair, raising his blemished hands.

“My ability to stand was taken from me forty years ago. When I realized I would no longer be able to fulfill my dream of standing on the battlefield, I was inconsolable, mourning the greatest loss in my life.”

“...”

“I must thank you, assassin, for visiting our land...and giving me another chance to destroy the Empire.”

Growley, the head of the Zoa.

Possessor of an exceedingly special counterattack—an astral power called Vice. Though he was over seventy, he had more fury permeating his core than any other astral mage.

Facing him was a certain Saint Disciple... The Imperial assassin challenging the head of household was a beast who had come to this place, drawn in by Growley’s anger.

“You must be a notorious man. You didn’t just notice me here, but you arrived in high spirits. There are not many who stand their ground upon coming in contact with my intimidating air.”

“...”

“Then why don’t I give you special permission to introduce yourself?”

“Hah!” The assassin snorted. “I was wondering what the monster would say when it spoke. Comical.”

He was the Saint Disciple of the eighth seat, the Invisible Hand of God, Nameless.

The man in a full-body suit stopped before chuckling in a low voice.

“Introduce myself? There’s been a misunderstanding, sorcerer. Only humans exchange introductions. A monster like you only exists to be exterminated.”

“So I am a monster? If you’re trying to say I’m a monster because the people fear me, you might be right—for it’s not just the Imperial forces that shy from me, but also my very own.”

Creak... The wheelchair protested as the elderly man on the platform leaned forward.

He fixed a glare on the Saint Disciple, who had invaded the Moon Spire on his own. His glowering eyes could have burned a hole through the assassin.

“How sinful.”

“...Excuse me?”

“It’s time for you to atone.”

This elderly man led one of the three bloodlines.

When he fulfilled a certain condition, the sorcerer’s astral power transformed into one of the strongest out there.

“I am Growley, the head of the Zoa. Now, how about we weigh out your sins?”

The Queen's Space.

The night breeze wafted through the window, cool to the touch with an occasional burst of heat. The heat of the flames had been swept up in the air current, making its way to this floor.

"Extinguish the fire with the smallest amount of mages possible. Put the remaining defenses on the spires."

Twelve people had gathered in the Queen's Space.

Five of them were the strongest guards, the Astrals. Seven were from the Rulers, a raid unit formed to hunt down invaders. Each of them had been endowed with intimidating amounts of astral power, all masters of their trade with battle experience.

"You twelve. You were all given more power than commanders for this very day."

The enemy were their best.

As soon as Mirabella Lou Nebulis IIX determined that, she promptly had her retainers and attendants take shelter. After all, this surprise attack did not look like it would become wide-scale annihilation.

"Their targets are important figures in the four spires, including the Queen's Palace... I'm guessing they're after the royal family, the Founder's descendants in particular, including myself."

"We'll stay by your side and overpower the enemy when they attack."

"Exactly." Mirabella nodded firmly so everyone would see.

The enemies were likely Saint Disciples or correspondingly powerful elite troops. Though she was a descendant of the Founder, it would be difficult for her to have a landslide victory when fighting them one on one.

These twelve would be her bodyguards.

"Under no circumstances will you allow them to escape. If we fail to capture them, things will become more complicated than they have to be."

They could take them as prisoners or apprehend them for questioning. The possibilities were endless. They couldn't afford to let even a single assassin escape.

"As for the assassins that strike, you know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Head out. I'm counting on you."

The twelve soldiers scattered, closing the door to the Queen's Space behind them and leaving Queen Mirabella on her own inside. Her own two Astrals were on lookout in front of her door.

"...Ah." She looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

She had finished giving her commands so the astral corps could perform their best.

The silence was deafening. Her nerves made her ears ring.

"How long has it been since I've been so tense?"

Time crawled.

It was two in the morning. It felt as though she had to wait an agonizing hour each time the needle of the clock tower ticked by a minute.

...I imagine the Imperial force will want to settle this by sunrise.

...We have the advantage in that we can mobilize our full force. We just need to make sure we do not allow the enemy's tactics to disorient us.

If her middle daughter, Aliceliese, returned to the palace, they would be able to settle this before sunrise. She couldn't have been more than thirty minutes away from the palace.

"This is just a ripple. The Sovereignty will not be disturbed."

Mirabella placed a hand on her chest, trying to settle her throbbing heart even in the slightest.

"This is paradise for all astral mages. No one may trample—"

"For *all* mages? Is that really true?"

Did she just see a silver flash?

The queen had not been able to follow the ephemeral light.

It had happened in an instant, even quicker than one could blink an eye.

Shing. A metallic sound echoed. Mirabella realized that the door of the Queen's Space had been axed through only after it splintered before her.

"...Impossible!"

What had once been a door scattered on the floor. The mechanical lock, which had been turned from the inside, showed a cross section that had been cut frighteningly smoothly.

"I take it that you're the queen of Nebulis?"

There had been no footsteps.

The dust from the pulverized door parted to reveal a man with a narrow long sword. He was an Imperial swordsman with a shock of red hair and a custom battle uniform, which was something between armor and a coat.

"..."

Her two guards should have been on standby in the passageway that this man had come from. And since she couldn't hear them stirring anymore...she had her answer.

...But I find it hard to believe.

...Did he defeat my two guards without a single sound?

If they had determined that they were up against a tough enemy, they would have called for backup. They might have even called the queen herself for assistance.

But if there hadn't been enough time for them to do that... Did that mean this man was capable of operating at nearly divine speeds?

"I'm Joheim. I'll have you know that I'm the Saint Disciple of the first seat."

"...You are?" She swallowed her breath and doubted her ears.

The Saint Disciples in the third seat and above were under the direct control

of the Lord. It was said they never left their leader's side for any reason and remained stationed in the Lord's offices deep in the Imperial capital.

The hundred-year rule had been overturned.

"Will you beg for forgiveness?"

"Silence, oaf. Who do you think I am?"

Even in front of the strongest Imperial soldier, Queen Mirabella's chest didn't flood with signs of distress—but unwavering confidence and pride.

"I'm Queen Nebulis. As the leader of this country, I will defeat any assassin."

"Keep dreaming, Queen."

The Saint Disciple of the first seat readied his sword.

"This country is no paradise. All its fake dreams will end here...and the world will be born anew."

Afterword

The unraveling of the witches' paradise, and another tale...

This concludes the sixth volume of *Our Last Crusade or the Rise of a New World*. Thank you for picking up the longest volume of this series so far!

The theme for this volume is “under one roof.”

Elletear joins her two witch sisters, Alice and Sisbell, for a very animated story (?) of three siblings. Meanwhile, embers fly between the two superpowers as the curtain rises on an international stage.

I hope you expect great things from the next volume as the Saint Disciples and witches meet each other head-on.

Also...this volume allowed us a glimpse into the transcendental sorcerer's way of life. He's always had a peculiar attachment to the queen, since his first appearance in Volume 3. I hope you look forward to uncovering the fate that keeps them entwined, which mirrors Iska and Alice's relationship.

And here's an exciting announcement about the manga!

We started serializing the manga adaptation in *Young Animal*, which is illustrated by okama. There are some scenes that translate really well for the medium, and the first volume will be on sale starting December 26!

To celebrate the first volume of the manga, it'll include an exclusive story written by yours truly. It would make me so happy if you were to enjoy it alongside the novels!

One more announcement: I would like to introduce a story that is unfolding simultaneously with this series.

Published by MF Bunko J, *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?*

The sixth volume is anticipated to be published next year on February 25.

We're printing another round of the novel and the first volume of the manga, and it's been doing well online. If you'd like something to read before the next volume of this series, might I suggest this book?

I have some happy news. We've started a Twitter account summarizing information about all my publications, including *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?*

Check us out at Kei Sazane Project (<https://twitter.com/sazaneKproject>).

The person managing this account will collect news from all publishing companies and media about ongoing manga and novel releases and all past and future series.

I would be so happy if you'd join me there! I hope it'll fill you in on what I'm up to these days!

(I also make announcements on my own personal account: <https://twitter.com/sazaneK>.) Finally, I think we're due for some thanks.

To Ao Nekonabe. Thank you for the gorgeous cover of Elletear. When you sent it to me, it was as if I were seeing for the first time.

To my former editor K, I was so surprised to hear about the transfer... I owe you for helping me with this series—from the title to character creation to many difficult aspects of the work. Thank you so much.

To my new editor Y. Your advice is so on the nose, especially your input on this volume and my short story. I'm looking forward to working with you more!

Last but not least, to all the people who picked up Volume 6, I would like to thank you.

As the battle between the Saint Disciples and astral mages in the palace becomes more fraught, the story between the swordsman and the witch princess continues to accelerate, since they just can't untangle themselves from the fate of the planet.

I hope you look forward to a big splash in the next volume. All right, then.

Until we see each other again in Volume 6 of *Why Doesn't Anyone Remember My World?* (MF Bunko J) on February 25 or Volume 7 of *Our Last Crusade or the*

Rise of a New World, coming next spring.

I pray we meet again in both.

Late on a chilly autumn night,

Kei Sazane

<https://twitter.com/sazaneke>

I occasionally make posts about publication announcements on Twitter.

Announcement:
VOLUME 7

**“I never wanted to
fight against you,
mired in these
murky emotions!”**

**“We might need
to keep faking
this love-hate
relationship...!”**

The palace is up in flames. For the first time since its founding, the Paradise of Witches is being raided by Imperial forces. It's Imperial soldier against Sovereign witch—Saint Disciples versus purebreds. As war obliterates all indiscriminately, Iska and Alice are cornered into making a certain life-altering decision...

***In the seventh volume, an unknown witch
begins to make her move—as paradise falls.***

❖ The content of this book is subject to change without advance notice.

Our Last **CRUSADE** *New World*
OR THE RISE OF A

VOLUME 7

Coming soon

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